Course Workbook

Sessions One & Two—A Past but no Present

Some ages have a clear sense of identity and purpose. Others seem to be always in transition. Western culture in the 21st century is one of the latter. We tend to define things in terms of a lost past: post-industrial, post-imperial, post-modern, post-Christendom, and so on. In this sense we can speak of contemporary Western culture as having a past but no present—though the future seems to be rushing in on us at an ever-increasing rate.

Contemporary Western culture is a maelstrom of contradictory influences and neuroses with few fixed points. It is pluralist and individualistic; faithless and multi-faith; complacent and searching; self-satisfied and yearning; idealistic and fashion-driven; voyeuristic and exhibitionist; and so much more. (And then, within this, there are islands of stability; groups of people who cling to a past that seems to offer the promise of a golden age. They, too, are part of contemporary society, even though we will not pay them much attention in this course.)

It is into this multifaceted cauldron of conflicting perspectives that we are called as Christians to serve the world, proclaim the good news of Jesus and live the kingdom life. We cannot do this unless we understand the culture in which we are working. In these opening sessions we will look at some of the trends and influences which underpin Western culture's current understandings of life, the universe and everything.

The fall of classical science

> *Nature and Nature's Laws lay hid in Night*
> *God said,* Let Newton be! *and all was Light.*—Alexander Pope, 1730.

We start with science because the *modern* age was built on the intellectual foundations supplied by science, Newtonian physics in particular. Science became the cornerstone because of its success in helping us to make sense of the world and also because it seems to enable us to gain a greater degree of control over our environment. From the time of Newton (1642-1727) until the end of the 19th century it was possible to consider the universe as a great machine with God as the great clockmaker who wound up the universe at its beginning.

As the notion of 'scientific proof' became more widespread the very existence of God was called into question since if he could not be proved to exist there was, as Pierre Simon de Laplace (1749-1827) is said to have remarked, no need for the 'God hypothesis'. Darwin's development of the mechanisms of evolution through natural selection and random mutation seemed to offer the possibility of discarding God altogether from any serious rational thought.

Yet even at its moment of greatest triumph, some of the key principles which underpin modernist thought were being challenged and overthrown. Four of the most important were:

Linearity

In classical science simple linear arithmetic was universal, in other words, one and one always equalled two. For instance, if two cars are approaching each other, one at 50 mph and the other at 40 mph, their relative speed must be 90 (=50+40) mph. It seemed so obvious that no even thought of questioning it. But the theory of relativity changed all that. Albert Einstein (1879-1955) showed in 1905 that if two objects are approaching each other,

the sum of their speeds is always less than simple linear arithmetic predicts. The faster you go, the greater the difference. For instance, if each car is travelling at 90% of the speed of light, the relative velocity will not be 180% of the speed of light but a mere 95% (i.e., 0.9+0.9=0.95)!

Continuity

In the Newtonian worldview, space and time are also seen as continuous and infinite; no matter where you are it will always be possible to travel an infinitely small amount in any direction. Qualities such as force and energy are also continuous and capable of increasing or decreasing by any amount you care to choose.

The introduction, in 1900, of quantum theory by Max Planck (1858-1947) blew this notion out of the water. Energy, it was discovered, was not continuous, but existed in discrete 'chunks' known as quanta. Thus you could have one quantum of energy, or two quanta of energy, but not one and a half quanta or any other fraction.

Duality

The Newtonian world is a world with clear divisions—either a thing *is* or it *is not*. In the quantum universe existence is not so black and white. For instance, light can be thought of as particles called photons. Experiments show that if photons approach a sheet with two small holes in it they behave exactly as if each photon goes through each hole at the same time. Similarly it appears that electrons sometimes behave as if they are going in two different directions simultaneously. This change, from *either/or* to *both/and* has affected the way we see the world and has influenced much contemporary thought.

Predictability

If the universe is linear and continuous it will always be possible to predict the future—in theory, at least. The advent of what is often known as chaos theory has led us to see that most systems in the universe are actually unpredictable by their very nature (see complexity theory below for more information).

Perfect observer

At the heart of the Newtonian world view was the notion of the perfect observer: the scientist who could observe the world without influencing it. This idea was probably influential in developing an instrumental attitude towards creation. Instead of seeing people as an integral part of creation, the modern worldview saw nature as something apart, able to be acted upon without affecting us. The environmental consequences of this way of imagining reality are now clear to us all (though the world view is still powerful and prevents many of us from fully accepting and acting upon the implications of climate change, pollution, species extinction and so on).

In physics, it was Werner Heisenberg (1901-1976) who challenged the notion of the perfect observer. He showed that the very act of observation affects the object being observed. If you measure the position of an electron very exactly, you cannot know its velocity (and vice versa).

Complexity and Emergence

> *I think the next century will be the century of complexity.*—Stephen Hawking January 2000.

Until the invention of fast computers it was necessary to pretend that the universe was simple and more or less Newtonian, even though an increasing number of scientists had begun to realise that it is actually complex and not very Newtonian at all.

The advent of computer modelling meant that many problems could be looked at in a new light. The result was the still-developing discipline of complexity science. Complexity applies to many disciplines from physics to biology, from meteorology to sociology and from chemistry to organisation theory. Below is a table indicating some of the differences between simple systems and complex systems:

Simple Systems	Complex Systems
• Interchangeable parts	• Individual parts
• Each part has specific purpose	• Each part can adapt
• Each part is unchanging	• Each part changes as others change
• A change in a part usually leads to break down	• A change in a part may lead to growth
• Programmed externally	• Self-organising
• Theoretically predictable	• Unpredictable but patterned
• Whole equals sum of parts	• Whole greater than sum of parts
• Little adaptation to environment	• Very adaptive to environment

Emergence

One of the key characteristics of complex systems is that they display *emergent* behaviour. Emergent change in a system (weather, chemical reactions, groups of people, etc.) is characterised by a creation of patterns at the level of the system which arise simply as a result of interactions between individual elements in the system (pressure and temperature gradients in the atmosphere, molecular interactions, conversations and stories exchanged between people).

Emergent patterns cannot be forced or predicted yet they are not random either. A simple example might be the little whirlpool formed as water drains from a bath. As long as the water flow is great enough we can see a fairly stable vortex at the plug hole. As the flow diminishes, the pattern collapses. It would be impossible to predict the exact path of any given water molecule through the vortex, yet the pattern itself is instantly recognisable.

Co-creation

A traditional, modernist, view of creation sees the creative act as the result of the will and actions of the individual. An emergent perspective suggests that creation is actually *co*-creation—it is the result of collaborative action between many people.

Traditionally we have read the creation stories in Genesis 1 & 2 as accounts (whether 'factual' or not) of God's sole sovereign activity in bringing the universe into being out of nothing. Yet, with the possibility of co-creation in mind, there are other possible readings. Many commentators have noted God's plural self-description in the first creation story: "Let *us* make man…". This could be read as an acknowledgement of the reality of co-creation, even within the Godhead.

More particularly, in Genesis 2:18-20 God makes animals and brings them to Adam to name. Given the importance of names in Hebrew culture, naming can be seen as a creative act in itself. Here we have God and Adam in active co-creation.

The Nature of Culture

> *Organisation culture is the emergent result of the continuing negotiations about values, meanings and proprieties between the members of that organisation and with its environment.* (Seel, 2000:3)

A complexity view of culture would lead us to a definition similar to that given above—that Western culture has not been deliberately created by a few powerful or influential people (a modernist view) but rather has simply come about as the result of *all* of the interactions between *everyone* in the West.

It is the stories we tell about values, the conversations we have about life, the negotiations about the 'correct' way to do things—these are the ways in which we co-create the culture in which we live. This is one reason why it is so hard to be fully aware of our own culture—we live it and breathe it and take it for granted just because it is so mundane and everyday. Yet our culture shapes our ability to perceive and to act; it is the filter though which we experience daily living.

Social Constructionism

> *We must be the change we wish to see in the world.*—Gandhi

Social constructionism argues that world around us is, to a large extent, socially constructed—we decide (consciously or unconsciously) how things are. As an example, the prevailing modernist paradigm has been one of problem-solving; if we want things to change we look for the problems and work out how to fix them. Appreciative Inquiry, an approach to change based on constructionist principles, says that if you look for problems you will always find problems. Instead, it argues, let us look for the positive and imagine how we can build a future based on doing more of the things that are good. So effective has this approach been that it is now used by many major multinationals and is the change approach of choice for the US Navy!

Postmodernism

> *The ONLY ABSOLUTE TRUTH is that there are NO ABSOLUTE TRUTHS*—Feyerabend.

Postmodernism is both a philosophical position and a slogan. The philosophical position, particularly associated with French philosophers such as Jean-François Lyotard (1924-1998), Michel Foucault (1926-1984) and Jacques Derrida (1930-2004), argues that the certainties of the Enlightenment are merely one perspective on reality—and a very blinkered one at that.

Lyotard was especially concerned with the notion of the 'grand narrative' (also known as a metanarrative)—an overarching story which purports to convey some absolute truth about the universe. Grand narratives imply a degree of uniformity and shared belief which flies in the face of the diversity we see around us. Instead we should value the small stories told by each individual. In other words there is no *Truth* (with a capital T) but simply *my* truth and *your* truth and *her* truth and *his* truth and…

Derrida introduced the notion of *deconstruction*. Deconstruction is an attempt to show that any given text is open to several meanings or interpretations. The notion has become quite commonplace today where we are used to 'reframing' a story about a half-empty glass as a story about a half-full glass (or vice versa). 'Spin' is deconstruction writ into the political domain and advertising offers us a multitude of stories about ourselves.

Foucault, who often refused to be identified with postmodernism, emphasised the importance of power in determining which stories could be told and which had to be kept

secret. These ideas have become very influential; for instance, one of the key achievements of feminism has been to point out that the grand narratives of traditional *his*tory can (and must?) be countered by narratives of *her*story.

As a slogan, postmodernism (sometimes abbreviated to PoMo) is used as a vague descriptive term for a sceptical, multi-perspective, playful way of looking at the world which is increasingly common in contemporary western culture.

Technology

> *The number of transistors on an integrated circuit for minimum component cost doubles every 24 months* ('Moore's Law')—Gordon Moore, 1965.

Technology has had a huge impact on both lifestyle and worldview. Labour-saving gadgets have revolutionised domestic life, automation has transformed industry, electronic toys have redefined leisure, improved transport has shortened distances between communities and the internet has created instant access to a global community of relationship and information.

Perhaps even more importantly, technology change has driven, and is driven by, an ever-increasing rate of social and economic change. One result of this is the widespread belief that technology will be able to save any problem, from health care to climate change, without the need for people to change their behaviours. On the other hand, technology has also opened up opportunities for new kinds of collective activism.

Mass Media

> *The medium is the message*—Marshall McLuhan, 1964.

The influence of mass media, especially television, on contemporary culture cannot be overestimated. McLuhan's dictum, that the nature of a medium enables some kinds of message and disables others, can be seen as Western society becomes increasingly visual and less auditory.

Changes of style in television have mirrored changes in society. Editing is now much faster, continuity is often ignored and the lines between drama and documentary become increasingly blurred. Soap operas have become modern morality tales, dispensing their own brand of ethics and propriety.

Music, too, has a huge part to play in contemporary life. Sony's Walkman and its modern counterpart, the iPod, have led to music being 'consumed' in times and places hitherto impossible and inconceivable.

Most recently we have seen the trend towards what is often known as Web 2.0 which encourages the democratisation of creativity with sites such as YouTube and Flickr where people can post their own video clips and images; and the creation of virtual social spaces such as MySpace, Bebo or Facebook. MMOGs (massively multi-player online games) such as *World of Warcraft*, with 7.7 million subscribers and *Second Life*—a virtual world rather than a game—which has over 2 million subscribers, now offer the chance to interact with people from across the world in new ways. They also raise big questions about the nature of 'reality'.

Globalisation

> *The new electronic interdependence recreates the world in the image of a global village*—Marshall McLuhan, 1962.

Improvements in transport and communications have led to a softening of national boundaries and identities. The growth of global capitalism, with its emphasis on 'the bottom line' has led to the development of multinational companies whose interests are focused on shareholder return rather than adding value to the countries in which they operate. This phenomenon is hardly new; imperial powers have been doing the same in their colonies and subject possessions for centuries. What is newer is the power of private corporations and the influence they can have on even the largest governments (the role of firms like Exxon and Haliburton in US foreign policy has been debated at length, for instance.)

Nationality has also become strained. Norman Tebbit's cricket test, set in 1990, tried to impose a narrow view of national identity. It has not succeeded and today we are still trying to come to terms with the issues which come with a multi-faith, multi-ethnic pluralistic society. Many people are now happy to live away from their country of birth; their reasons are many, ranging from a desire for more sun or a more prosperous life to flight from persecution.

Individualism

There is no such thing as society—Margaret Thatcher, 1987.

Individualism is not a new phenomenon. Indeed, it can be seen as a characteristic of the Enlightenment, and the Reformation before it. The Protestant emphases on the salvation of the individual's soul and the relationship between the individual and God were in sharp distinction to Catholic doctrines of the church and its salvific role.

For much of the last century debates rages about the relative importance of nature and nurture. A key work was Margaret Mead's *Coming of Age in Samoa* (2001)—she argued that we are not biologically programmed but can make ourselves whatever we want. Her work was taken up enthusiastically in the 1960s when she was seen as a prophet of free love and a new way of living. (For a different view on her Samoan material and the whole debate, see Freeman 1999.)

An ever increasing emphasis on the role of the individual in contemporary society leads to an emphasis on *rights* rather than *duties*; a proliferation of self-help books and courses; a breakdown of extended family; relationships made through personal networks rather than membership of formal groups; and an increasing anxiety about self-image.

Feminism

A woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle—Anon.

Feminism is both a key component of western culture and also a symptom of a wider set of values pertaining to equality and justice. The old patriarchal hierarchies (still hanging on to their power) represent a world view which has persisted since medieval times.

Feminism—and gay liberation, disability rights and similar movements—argue for a world view which is less rigid and stratified. They argue for a meritocracy, where achievement is based on talent, not social position or a 'contingent' feature such as gender, sexual orientation, or disability.

Along with the concern for natural justice and fairness is the postmodern assumption that, 'all lifestyles are valid'—if there is no metanarrative, then no individual story should be privileged over others. To deny my lifestyle story then becomes an act of political violence against me.

Consumerism

Tesco ergo sum (I shop therefore I exist)—Anon.

Conspicuous consumption has been a feature of many societies. For instance, the potlatch ceremonies of the North West coast of America, where rich men destroy vast amounts of wealth, was used as an exemplar of the term by the economist and sociologist Thorstein Veblen in his classic *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899). Other examples include competitive feasting in New Guinea, medieval banquets and the gifts exchanged between the Queen of Sheba ("never again did spices come in such quantity as that which the Queen of Sheba gave to King Solomon") and King Solomon ("Meanwhile King Solomon granted the queen of Sheba every desire that she expressed, well beyond what she had brought to the king." 2Chr 9:12). Note that, according to the author of Chronicles, Solomon's gifts to the Queen were greater than her gifts to him—thus confirming his greater status.

In all these cases conspicuous consumption is used to mark power and status; it is necessarily the preserve of an elite few. Contemporary western culture is unique in mutating conspicuous consumption into consumerism. Consumption is now the duty of the many: shop till you drop; live now, pay later; spend, spend, spend; retail therapy—the clichés say it all.

Perhaps one of the greatest triumphs of consumerism is that manufacturers can now get consumers to advertise their products for free while also charging a premium price for the privilege of so doing. The desire for the designer label, especially when coupled with the cult of celebrity is a powerful way of achieving an acceptable identity in contemporary culture.

Indeed, consumerism seems to undermine the notion that all lifestyles are equivalent. In theory, they might be; in practice, only those sanctioned by the celebrity market are worth celebrating. So the fragile self-constructed identity story which characterises so many postmodern people is always challenged by the lifestyle of the rich and famous; in order to validate my identity I must follow what they say, do, wear, and believe.

Conspiracy culture

The truth is out there—The X Files

If someone in authority tells you that something is true, then a) they are lying, b) they are covering up a conspiracy, or c) they are engaging in 'spin'. As a consequence, perhaps, of postmodern deconstruction of the power structures inherent in any reading of a text, especially of privileged reading, there is a widespread scepticism in society which manifests itself most clearly in the number of conspiracy theorists who now exist.

Neil Armstrong did not land on the moon—it was all staged in a big air force hangar at a secret base in the Nevada desert. The Two Towers were not demolished by Muslim extremists following the precepts of Osama bin Laden—they were demolished by CIA operatives so that the Republican administration could introduce swingeing security laws. Jesus did not die on the cross…

In an age where Dan Brown can score a best-seller by rehashing some thirty-year-old ideas, any appeal to 'authority' is likely to be suspect. Indeed, the greater the efforts to discredit the conspiracy theorists, the more likely they are to see these attempts as 'evidence' of a cover-up.

Steve Hollinghurst (2006) reports some of the reactions to a programme on ITV about *The Da Vinci Code*. The programme showed that most of Dan Brown's controversial assertions

were simply factually incorrect. Nevertheless, many of those who saw the programme remained unconvinced. The response of a man from Dudley in the West Midlands was typical of many:

> *The facts speaks for themselves; as the saying goes, there's no smoke without fire.*

Sex

> *Sex. In America an obsession. In other parts of the world a fact.* Marlene Dietrich

Contemporary society says that the church is obsessed with sex. The church says that contemporary society is obsessed with sex. The legacy of the sixties with its emphasis on free love and self-actualisation is still with us. This is not the first age to be obsessed with explicit sexual behaviour and it may well not be the last.

What is perhaps different is the ease of access to pornographic material. It is said that the success of VHS over Betamax was down to the fact that you couldn't get a full pornographic film on the early Betamax tapes. It is similarly argued that pornography has provided the 'killer app' (critical application) for the growth of the internet—a crude estimate would be that there are at least 350,000,000 pages with pornographic content on the internet.

Not surprisingly, in a consumerist individualistic society, sex has become a commodity and everyone has a right to have as much as they want/need. Notions of abstinence are seen as 'quaint' at best and perverted at worst.

Compensation culture

> *I didn't do it!*—Bart Simpson.

One final factor: the rise of an emphasis on rights as opposed to duties has led to the notion that nothing is ever 'my' fault. But the notion of fault has not been abolished; it has been transferred to the 'other'. Indeed, the notion of causality is so strong that there must be a 'reason' for everything. So, if something bad has happened to me, it happened for a reason and that reason must be that someone else is at fault. In which case it is might 'right' to be compensated.

As we will see issues surrounding personal fault (sin) and cause (if there was a God he wouldn't let earthquakes, etc. happen) are key when engaging with people in contemporary society.

Conclusion

This is not exhaustive and it would be easy to add more dimensions of contemporary culture to the ones offered here. Perhaps more important is to remember that all of them are actually inter-related and co-evolving with one another.

If we are to engage with contemporary Western culture then we need to understand, and to some extent empathise with, the forces that are driving the people we meet every day.

Sessions One & Two Notes—A Past but no Present

Fall of Classical Science

The Newton quote is from Alexander Pope, *Epitaph: Intended for Sir Isaac Newton*, 1730. In 1926 Sir John Squire countered, "It did not last: the Devil, howling 'Ho! Let Einstein be!' restored the status quo".

I have no need of that hypothesis

"According to a story commonly told, Laplace presented Napoleon with a copy of his book on the System of the World; Napoleon notes that Laplace did not mention God in it; Laplace replies, "I have no need of that hypothesis."

I have come across several occasions on which people have claimed this story is apocryphal. This is not quite true; it is fictionalized history. The real story, which happened in August of 1802, is given by Sir William Herschel (among other things, the discoverer of Uranus, binary star systems, the first asteroid, and infrared rays):

"The first Consul then asked a few questions relating to Astronomy and the construction of the heavens to which I made such answers as seemed to give him great satisfaction. He also addressed himself to Mr. Laplace on the same subject, and held a considerable argument with him in which he differed from that eminent mathematician. The difference was occasioned by an exclamation of the first Consul, who asked in a tone of exclamation or admiration (when we were speaking of the extent of the sidereal heavens): 'And who is the author of all this!' Mons. de la Place wished to shew that a chain of natural causes would account for the construction and preservation of the wonderful system. This the first Consul rather opposed. Much may be said on the subject; by joining the arguments of both we shall be led to 'Nature and nature's God'."

[Source: Herschel's diary of his visit to Paris in 1802, as found in C. Lubbock's *The Herschel Chronicle*, p. 310.]

From Bandon Watson's site: http://branemrys.org/archives/2004/08/i-have-no-need-of-that-hypothesis/

Quantum theory

Although Max Planck is often thought of as the founder of quantum theory it actually came about through the work of many (including Bohr, de Broglie, Dirac, Einstein, Heisenberg and Schrödinger) who built on Planck's foundations. Relativity theory, on the other hand, is almost exclusively the work of one man—Albert Einstein.

Although it is old and out of print, one of the best explanations of the rise of quantum theory is Banesh Hoffman's *The Strange Story of the Quantum*. Copies can still be found on Amazon and Abebooks.com

For a video on the double slit experiment see
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DfPeprQ7oGc

Chaos theory

Chaos by James Gleick is a good readable introduction to notions of chaos. Ian Stewart's *Does God Play Dice* is a bit more technical but still accessible for most people.

Complexity & Emergence

The Hawking quote appeared on 23rd January 2000 in the *San Jose Mercury News*.

Complexity by Mitchell Waldrop is a good introduction to notions of complexity, especially as associated with the Santa Fe institute.

Social Constructionism

There is some debate about the difference between constructionism and constructivism; consult the internet if you really want to know more.

One of the seminal texts in social constructionism is *The Social Construction of Reality* by Peter Berger (1929-) & Thomas Luckman (1927-). Berger is Professor of Sociology and Theology at Boston University, and director of the Institute on Culture, Religion and World Affairs. A fascinating article by him on the decline of mainstream protestant Christianity in the USA can be found at http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=232

Appreciative Inquiry was developed by David Cooperrider at Case Western University in the USA. For more information see http://www.new-paradigm.co.uk/appreciative.htm

Postmodernism

The "absolute truth" quote is from Paul Feyerabend (1924-1994), an Austrian philosopher of science. He denied the possibility of absolute truth in science.

The Enlightenment

The Enlightenment is the name given to both an historical period (basically the 18th century) and a way of thinking about the world. Enlightenment thinking raised *reason* to new heights. Its leaders saw themselves as liberating the world (i.e. Europe) from the tyranny of the superstition and anarchy of the Dark Ages. Religion was often seen as oppressor rather than victim and atheism and Deism (a rationalistic approach to religion which rejected revelation, 'superstition', and claims of Jesus' divinity) became more common.

Lyotard

The first five chapters of Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Manchester University Press 1984) can be found online at
http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/fr/lyotard.htm

Postmodernism criticised

Postmodernism has its critics. For instance, Pauline Rosenau (1992) identifies seven contradictions in Postmodernism:

1. Its anti-theoretical position is essentially a theoretical stand.
2. While Postmodernism stresses the irrational, instruments of reason are freely employed to advance its perspective.
3. The Postmodern prescription to focus on the marginal is itself an evaluative emphasis of precisely the sort that it otherwise attacks.
4. Postmodernism stress intertextuality but often treats text in isolation.
5. By adamantly rejecting modern criteria for assessing theory, Postmodernists cannot argue that there are no valid criteria for judgement.
6. Postmodernism criticizes the inconsistency of modernism, but refuses to be held to norms of consistency itself.

7. Postmodernists contradict themselves by relinquishing truth claims in their own writings.

The above list from http://www.as.ua.edu/ant/Faculty/murphy/436/pomo.htm

Power and story-telling
David Boje (1995) has written an interesting and readable article about power and stories in Disney Corp.

Technology

Gordon Moore (1929-) was one of the co-founders, with Robert Noyce (1927-1990) of the Intel Corporation. More on his famous 'law', including a video of him explaining it, can be found at http://www.intel.com/technology/mooreslaw/index.htm

Mass Media

The quote by Marshall McLuhan comes from his book *Understanding Media*.

YouTube: http://www.youtube.com

MySpace: http://www.myspace.com

Bebo: http://www.bebo.com/

Facebook: http://www.facebook.com

World of Warcraft: http://www.worldofwarcraft.com

Second Life: http://secondlife.com

Globalisation

Global village is a term coined by Herbert Marshall McLuhan (1911-1908) in his book *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962:32). (Though Wyndham Lewis in his book *America and Cosmic Man* (1948) came up with something similar: "…now that the earth has become one big village, with telephones laid on from one end to the other, and air transport, both speedy and safe…". McLuhan's book describes how electronic mass media collapse space and time barriers in human communication, enabling people to interact and live on a global scale.

The 'Tebbit Test' comes from a statement made by Lord Tebbit (1931-) in an interview with the Los Angeles Times in 1990. He said, "A large proportion of Britain's Asian population fail to pass the cricket test. Which side do they cheer for? It's an interesting test. Are you still harking back to where you came from or where you are?"

An estimated 5.5m British people live permanently abroad—almost one in 10 of the UK population. In 2005 approximately 2,000 British citizens moved permanently away from the UK every week.
(http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/spl/hi/in_depth/brits_abroad/html/default.stm)

According to official UK government estimates, approximately 1,500 migrants arrived to live in the UK every day during 2005. The same figures suggest that 185,000 more people immigrated into the UK than emigrated to another country, yielding a net population gain of 500 per day.
(http://www.workpermit.com/news/2006_11_21/uk/2-year_immigration_statistics.htm)

Individualism

The "no such thing as society" quote is by Prime minister Margaret Thatcher, talking to *Women's Own* magazine, 31st October 1987. See her website for further elucidation: http://www.margaretthatcher.org/speeches/displaydocument.asp?docid=106689

The best-known argument of this sort is made by Robert Putnam in his article "Bowling Alone."

Feminism

The "fish on a bicycle" quote is often attributed to Gloria Steinem in the 1970s.

Consumerism

"Tesco ergo sum" has been variously attributed. (The earliest reference I have been able to find is in text of a meditation given by Brian Draper at the Alternative Worship Gathering in London, 9th May 1998:
http://seaspray.trinity-bris.ac.uk/~robertsp/altworship/altworship/new.html)

The term 'conspicuous consumption' was coined by Thorstein Veblen in his classic *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, first published in 1899. An e-text of the book can be found at http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/833

Conspiracy culture

A place to start exploring the moon landing conspiracy is
http://www.redzero.demon.co.uk/moonhoax/

There are a number of well-made documentaries about the twin towers conspiracy. You can see some on YouTube at:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P_q6j6BZkHQ or

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EMWn-bQYfSc or

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WUnLHAuNAZw.

It's also worth looking at the comments from viewers of the videos.

Sex

It is hardly necessary to offer any internet resources! Typing 'sex' into Google finds 26,700,000 pages with 'moderate safe search' on. With safe search off it finds 390,000,000 pages! (Google image search finds 1,400,00 and 2,730,00 images, respectively.)

Note: the above was written in May 2007. In June 2008 there were 786,000,000 pages with safe search off. Google image search found 81,800,000 pages with moderate safe search on and 127,000,000 pages with safe search off, implying that the number of pages with a sexual content have dramatically increased in a year or that Google is now more efficient than it was—probably a combination of the two. More significantly it implies that that in June 2008 there were at least 135,000,000 pages containing serious pornographic images (i.e. the difference between the two image search figures).

Compensation culture

The Bart Simpson quote is from *Bart Gets Famous*, written by John Swartzwelder, directed by Susie Dietter; production code: 1F11; original transmission 03-02-94.

Session Three—Contemporary Spirituality

Having looked at our contemporary fragmented rootless world in the first two sessions we now turn our attention to the spiritual life of Western culture. Attendance at church on Sundays has been declining for years. People are less and less 'religious'. But that does not mean that there has been a decline in belief—quite the contrary. As we will see, the majority of people today have serious spiritual concerns, though few of them feel that the church can offer anything meaningful.

In this session we will be looking at some of the recent research into the spirituality of people who have little or no contact with the church. We will then briefly explore alternative spiritualities, including 'new age' and 'dance/rave' cultures.

The evidence suggests that, despite the expectations of many humanists and atheists, spiritual awareness is actually growing quite fast in the West. For instance, research undertaken by David Hay of Nottingham University asked random samples of people in 1987 and in 2000 the same questions about their spiritual experiences and their awareness. These were the numbers of people who responded positively:

Question—Have you ever had an awareness of:	1987	2000
A patterning of events	29%	55%
The presence of God	27%	38%
Prayer being answered	25%	37%
A sacred presence in nature	16%	29%
The presence of the dead	18%	25%
An evil presence	12%	25%
Cumulative total of positive responses (some had more than one positive)	**48%**	**76%**

David Hay does not believe that there has been a real increase in the frequency of spiritual experience but rather that people are now more willing to talk about it even with strangers (both the 1987 and 2000 polls were conducted over the telephone). But what do these people mean by spirituality? In order to try to find out more we look at the results of a number of different pieces of research focusing on contemporary expressions of spirituality.

Understanding the spirituality of people who don't go to church

David Hay and Kate Hunt of the Adults' Spirituality project at the University of Nottingham invited people chosen at random in a suburb of Nottingham to fill in a questionnaire. From this they identified 31 people who had no religious affiliation and who described themselves as 'spiritual' or 'religious'. These were then encouraged to talk in four focus groups led by the researchers. Each group was both video and audio recorded. The ages of the participants ranged from 24 to 60, with seventeen women and fourteen men taking part. Seventeen people identified themselves as 'spiritual' and fourteen as 'religious'. Twenty-nine of the participants also agreed to take part in further one-to-one interviews with the researchers.

Some of their key findings:

- *Timidity*—perhaps the most significant finding was that nearly everyone they spoke to was very reluctant to talk about religion or spirituality. This seemed to go with a fear of being 'preached at' or evangelised. The reticence was greater when in a group; there appears to be strong peer pressure which keeps this a taboo subject.
- *Spirituality*—while some of the older people were not offended by the notion of religion, most associated it with dogma, rigidity and arrogance. Spirituality was not always a familiar concept but when it was explained it seemed to fit most people's experiences and self-perception.
- *Questing*—for most of the participants, spirituality could be described as a kind of questing or seeking, often on a road which seems shrouded in mist.
- *God*—people often used bits of the Christian metanarrative when they wanted words or concepts to describe their experiences. But the word 'God', for instance, was not used to describe the Trinitarian God of orthodox belief. Similarly, references to Jesus came only from people who had had some childhood exposure to Christianity but even they were uncertain about who or what he was.
- *'Something There'*—the most common response was to speak of 'something there', often something very important, but a refusal to name it or to speculate too much about it. In part this is due to ignorance and the effect of sustained cultural criticism of the notion of God in a secular scientific age. But Hay and Hunt also suggest that this might be seen as part of the *apophatic* tradition—refusing to utter the name of YHWH or accepting that we see through a glass darkly. The view was most starkly illustrated by 'James' who spoke of the 'something' he encountered as "deeper than God" and of his communion with it as "more profound than prayer". We will encounter this approach and the implications of it again in session four, which is on speaking of God in contemporary culture.
- *Self-constructed Theologies*—Hay and Hunt found that the people to whom they spoke had no coherent view of God or theories about the nature and purpose of the universe. Instead they used a 'pick and mix' approach, often using fragments from Christianity mixed in with some New Age ideas, bits of Buddhism (such as ideas of karma and reincarnation) and so on. This *bricolage* (a term coined by the French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss) is a common intellectual approach today, following the breakdown of confidence in the great metanarratives of religion and, increasingly, science.
- *Theodicy*—Theodicy—literally meaning the justice of God—is a term coined by the German philosopher and polymath Gottfried Leibnitz in 1710. He tried to show that despite the existence of evil in the world it is still possible and necessary to believe in a benevolent God. Despite Leibnitz's best endeavours, this sample of 20th century people still see the problem of suffering and natural disasters as a serious stumbling block to belief.

As a result of this study a question was inserted into the *Soul of Britain* survey (2000): "Some people don't think there is a God. Why do you think this is?" The answers were:

- *There is too much suffering, poverty and injustice for God to exist (41%)*
- *Lack of knowledge/teaching about God (31%)*
- *Science has explained the mysteries of life (22%)*
- *The concept of God is irrelevant to modern society (20%)*
- *Other (6%)*

- *Don't know (5%)*

In their study, Hay and Hunt also asked about the Church and Churchgoers. The responses were depressingly predictable but not quite as straightforward as the stereotypes might suggest:

- *Cynicism about the religious institution*—When in groups there were plenty of references to the church being hypocritical, bigoted, out of touch, and so on. In the one-to-one interviews a more subtle picture emerged, indicating the strength of social pressures to adopt a cynical critical attitude towards church. In private, the criticisms tended to be less severe. The criticisms which did emerge seemed to be around a perceived obsession with control, a desire to live in the past, and a failure to be concerned with humanity as a whole.
- *The Bible*—Even those who had been brought up with some religious background never mentioned reading the Bible. At best it seemed that the Bible was full of stories. At worst it was impossible to understand, bracketed with Shakespeare as part of our heritage but irrelevant to everyday life.
- *Church buildings*—although none of the people surveyed went to church when there were services in progress, quite a few would go when the building was empty. They would speak of their experiences by using words such as calmness, humbleness, tranquillity and beauty. Some couldn't find any words to describe how they felt when they went into a church—Rudolph Otto's *numinous*, perhaps—and there were a few who found the architecture off-putting: too austere, too gloomy, too big.
- *Inauthenticity*—the word 'hypocrisy' was commonly used to describe church folk, especially those who represent it in public. Christians can be seen as cloyingly nice in the context of church and behaving disgracefully when outside it.
- *Lack of openness to the outsider*—church is perceived as 'difficult' for beginners and closed to those who are 'different'. There was also a widespread fear that a conversation with a member of the clergy would lead to an embarrassing attempt to 'convert' them.

Barriers to Belief

Nick Spencer conducted a similar small-scale in-depth inquiry among 40 people in South London and Nottingham. The participants were selected as self-described non-believers, though militant atheists were excluded. The three groups in London (female 25-44, male 18-24 and male 25-44) were on the 'antagonistic' end of non-belief while the two Nottingham groups (female 18-24 and mixed 45+) were more open and tolerant. The research looked at barriers to belief and identified a number:

- *Hatred of Religion*—'religion' was a dirty word for most of the participants and seen as responsible for "most of the trouble around the world". Word associations included *stuffy*, *discipline*, *brainwashing*, *hypocrites*, *grasping at straws*, *child abusers*, *blinkered*, *dogmatic*, *make a donation* and *problem*. Some saw religion as irrelevant because it is old-fashioned, others were more sympathetic when they reflected on individual Christians they had known but they still tended to be negative when they thought of religion and religious people in general.
- *Consumer Spirituality*—spirituality was generally better received: word association brought up things such as *meditation*, *spiritual healing*, *yoga*, *peace*, *fear, haunted*, *white light*, *supernatural*, *incense*, and *Ouija boards*. Spirituality can incorporate but

also transcend religion; as one respondent put it, "spirituality is like football; religion is like a football team." Spirituality was generally seen as focused on the individual person, was consumer-oriented and fairly disposable.

- *Guerrilla Morality*—only religious people can be hypocrites—non-believers have their own moral systems but they keep them to themselves and so can't be accused of breaching their own values. Perhaps the major shared moral value was tolerance—something that Christians lack. All the participants saw themselves as tolerant; those with whom they disagreed were either intolerant (i.e. less tolerant than me) or 'politically correct' (more tolerant than me). Apart from this, being kind and avoiding harm, especially to family and friends, was seen as sufficient to be 'good'. The idea of having to live according to someone else's moral code was extremely distasteful; it meant you weren't thinking for yourself.
- *"Your typical Christian"*—word associations for 'Christian' included *patronising*, *desperate for support*, *colourless*, *begging for money*, *misfits*, *goody two shoes*, *holier than thou*, *well spoken*, *traditional*, *old-fashioned*, *law abiding*, *approachable* and *doing everything by the book*. Christians are out of touch and unfashionable, though sometimes they try too hard to be cool. They also tend to be self-centred in their outlook and conversation; they are on about religion all the time and aren't interested in other people. A set of perceptions like these would be a challenge for any image consultancy! Nevertheless, when individual Christians, both lay and ordained, were recollected the picture was much more positive: they were "fantastic", "self-effacing", "cracking people", "really very nice". But these experiences do not counter the prevailing negativity; they seem to be seen as the exceptions which prove the rule.
- *Evangelism*—evangelism is seen as almost as big a stumbling block as lack of tolerance. There was a horror of being 'invaded' by religious people who wanted to 'ram religion down your throat'. Indeed, even talking about religion in public could be seen as invasive and threatening. The distaste for evangelism could spread to a cynicism about any kind of church-led social or community care: *they only do it as a publicity stunt*…
- *The Bible*—knowledge of the Bible ranged from sketchy to nonexistent ("..it's all about another universe—a middle Earth" or "Is that a part of the Bible then, War and Peace?"). But this did not stop people making definitive pronouncements about it: there is no evidence to support any of it; Jesus was not a person but a made up character; it contradicts itself so it can't be true; it was written a long time after Jesus died and the stories are exaggerated; because there was no national media, things could not be relied upon. Christians believe it without questioning, which just shows how weird they are. The respondents had no conception that the Bible was anything other than one continuous story; the notion of different genres and books within it was absent.
- *Science*—science and religion can't both be right and science has disproved religion. It might be nice to believe, if only there was some scientific evidence for it. Also, we are materialistic now, whereas in the past people were more mystical so science is better for us now. The theory of evolution was discussed a lot but many people had difficulty with it as well; indeed 'arguments from design' actually tipped a few in the direction of belief. Those who were more positive about the theory naturally thought that it disproved religion—especially since religion means a literal interpretation of

Genesis 1-3. However, Richard Dawkins wouldn't draw much comfort either; knowledge of science was sketchy and for some included alien landings and pyramidology!

- *Suffering*—the problem of suffering (theodicy) loomed large in this survey too. Attitudes were complex and varied. Suffering was personal, evoking a mixture of anger and resignation. The usual 'if God existed he wouldn't have let this happen' arguments were put forward—especially in connection with natural disasters for which there seems to be no man-made cause. Nick Spencer notes the strong role of consumerism in this and other arguments: if the church does not deliver the kind of morality I want, it is intolerant; if God does not deliver the kind of world I want, He can't exist. There were some who looked beyond this rather self-centred view and one at least who acknowledged that there is comfort to be found in the church.
- *Other barriers*—a number of other barriers to belief were also highlighted. These included living in a multi-faith world, the problem of reconciling love and hell, a lack of 'proof' and the notion that belief is simply 'wishful thinking'.

Making Sense of Generation Y

The third piece of research is a little different. Whereas both previous studies had a mix of age groups, Sara Savage, Sylvia Collins and Bob Mayo studied the spiritual life of Generation Y. Sociologists and popular writers use a number of designations for the different post-war generations. Firstly there were the Baby Boomers, born roughly between 1945 and 1963 and so called because they were part of the great post-war population bulge. Then came Generation X, also known as the Baby Busters, born roughly between 1963 and 1981; they were followed by Generation Y, or the Millennial Generation, born between 1982 and 2000; and finally (for the present), Generation Z, born after 2000.

Savage, Collins & Mayo interviewed 135 young people, mainly between the ages of 15 and 25, in 26 focus groups throughout England. Of these, 52% were female, 48% male; 94% were white, 6% Black or Asian; 60% defined themselves as non-Christian, 40% as Christian. Their findings showed significant differences between this generation and those which preceded it. For instance, researchers have often spoken of a hunger for spirituality in Gen-X and Boomer people—a 'God-shaped hole' in their lives. None was found for the Gen-Y young people in this study. Instead, the major finding was of what the researchers call a 'happy midi-narrative'. It goes something like this:

> *"My aim to be happy will be realised through me being myself, and connecting to others and the universe (without harming them). As I do this, I will create a meaningful and happy life. If we all make this individual effort (everyone's own responsibility), each person's happiness will sum into a corporate experience of unity and enjoyment. This happiness is meaningful in itself; it is the Ideal.*
>
> *"However, bad things can happen in real life that prevent us from attaining this happiness: broken relationships, suffering, loneliness, depression, self-rejection, addiction, injustice, ageing. But each one of us is surrounded by resources of family and close friends who love us unconditionally. The popular arts provide us with valuable resources: information, choice, creativity. With these, we can experience movement from the Actual (real life where bad things can happen) towards the Ideal (happiness)."*

The study noted a number of things absent from this story:

- *Dualisms*—the Gen-Y story does not see the universe as a battle between good and evil. Instead, good is what promotes happiness; bad is what prevents happiness for self or others. There is also no distinction between Actual and Ideal (whereas many Christians might distinguish the actuality of this earthly life and the ideal of a heavenly future existence): the Ideal state of happiness will come about as a result of lots of Actual actions. The distinction between self and other is also lessened, as is any dichotomy between intellect and emotion; *feeling* is decisive.
- *A transcendent God*—there is little interest or room for notions of God or 'alternate' spiritualities.
- *Romance and sexual fulfilment*—romance and sex are seen as peripheral or problematic.
- *Sin*—there was no traditional concept of sin as moral degradation or rebellion nor of salvation.
- *Fear of death*—death is seen as less of a problem than ageing, which can lead to depression, loss of physical attractiveness and loneliness.
- *Achievement*—although the achievements of stars and celebrities are admired, they are not central to happiness, which is essentially relationally based.

A number of key concepts *are* present in the happy midi-narrative:

- *Caring for life*—The young people in the survey did not relate to any transcendent realm but did care deeply about life, symbolised in babies, children, the planet and animals.
- *Family & Friends*—The family is also a core symbol—"family are there for you". Although there was uncertainty about 'horizontal' roles such as marriage or co-habitation there was a clarity about the importance of traditional generational roles. Identity formation for this group is firmly located within the network of family and friends and although they didn't have faith in God they did have faith in their family and friends
- *Stars*—stars and celebrities are a living demonstration that the happiness narrative can work. They act, in effect, as gods and goddesses, offering a visible success to which others can aspire. The fact that new stars will emerge with some regularity offers encouragement to those who have not yet achieved the Ideal.
- *Commercialism*—if something becomes too popular or too commercial its value is destroyed. There is an perceived ambiguity about the market economy: on the one hand it enables choice and freedom (both valued); on the other hand it destroys creativity and independence through the pressures of commercialism.
- *Things to be avoided*—anything which gets in the way of happiness is to be avoided. This includes ageing, being depressed and being 'sad' or 'pathetic'.

Savage, Collins & Mayo also looked at the importance assumed by soap operas (especially *EastEnders*) and films. These offer glimpses of what the Ideal world would/will be like. The Actual world is often rather dull and largely free from real danger. The Ideal world is exciting, full of action; a place where the Ideal self can flourish—authentic, strong, good-looking and in control of one's self.

Soaps, because they were perceived as realistic, tended to help people understand the world and cope with any bad things which came up. Films, being more imaginative, tended

to offer more of the Ideal. Indeed, the most successful films could offer a passing experience of the Ideal which was a foretaste of things to come.

Music and clubbing were also important. Music provides a bridge between the Actual and Ideal self. Music is generally either *enjoyable* or *meaningful*: when rhythm predominates it is the enjoyment of the music which is paramount; when the lyrics encourage reflection on the Actual world they can be valued. Music can be both meaningful and enjoyable if the young people create it themselves (through DJ-ing, mixing or composing); if they identify closely with an artist; or if the music leads to lifestyle choices such as clubbing, or becoming a Punk, Goth or Emo etc.

Clubbing is a transcendent experience which brings the Ideal into the Actual, at least for the time being. The aim is to experience a collective 'high' which can be sustained for some time and then is brought down gently by a sensitive DJ. When clubbing you should be yourself, express yourself through the music and let others be themselves. (For more on this see the 'rave spirituality' section below.)

Alternative Spiritualities

Simon Small tells of some research which estimated that for every metre of shelf space given over to Christian books in shops like Waterstones there are 14 metres given to 'Mind, Body & Spirit'. What is sometimes known (though not to its followers) as "New Age Spirituality" is a hugely popular field—fourteen times more popular than the church if those crude figures are anything to go by!

Alternative spirituality is a blanket term covering a huge range of areas, including Spiritualism and Channelling; Earth Energies; Happiness & Well-Being; UFOs; Jung: Meditation; *A Course in Miracles* (Anon. 1997); Angels; Jesus; and many more. Small suggests that people tend to get interested alternative spirituality in their 20s or later.

Although there is great diversity within the alternative spirituality scene, there are some common themes which characterise many of those who are involved:

- *Starts with a sense that life is meaningless*—the journey into alternative spirituality often begins with a sense of meaninglessness and a disenchantment with life as it is lived—especially if that life is seen a 'successful' on the surface. As a result there is often a disenchantment with contemporary culture.
- *Deep suspicion of authority*—many in the alternative scene have a profound suspicion of authority: it's one reason why they ignore the church. This suspicion of authority extends to science as well as religion.
- *Experience is very important*—in the alternative scene people are enabled and allowed to share their spiritual experiences. This doesn't happen very often in church: Small suggests that many Christians have spiritual experiences which they never share with others—especially their priest or pastor.
- *The experience is private and hidden*—the research by Hay & Hunt and Nick Spencer above has already indicated that people tend to keep their spiritual experiences to themselves. This is certainly true of those exploring alternative spirituality.
- *The sense of journey is fundamental*—one reason why people move from one alternative spirituality to another is that there is a strong sense of journeying. When you have got as much as you can from one approach, you look for another which will take you further.

- *The alternative scene is very eclectic*—because of the need to journey, people take what they can or need from different approaches. In the end, everyone is responsible for structuring their own journey, even when part of it takes place under the supervision of someone more experienced.
- *The focus is on the inner search*—spirituality is seen as focused on inner experience. The aim is variously stated: self-actualisation; enlightenment; being fully present; oneness with the Godhead; nirvana; and so on.
- *It is a very loose and fluid community*—because people move on, and because the focus is on the inward journey, there is rarely any strong sense of community or desire for community action.
- *There is a tremendous sense of mystery*—people in the alternative scene are suspicious of attempts to pin down or explain the world.
- *Spiritual, not religious*—experience, rather than belief, is valued and considered valid.
- *There is often a sense of guidance or calling*—many have a sense of a loving intelligence which leads them from experience to experience.

Rave Spirituality

Friedrich Nietzsche, in his *The Birth of Tragedy* (1871), distinguished two modes: Apollonian and Dionysian. The former, he associated with the plastic arts, the latter with music. *Dream* is associated with Apollo and *ecstasy* with Dionysius. Nietzsche's idea was later used by Ruth Benedict (1989:79) to describe different approaches to religious experience. Apollonian religions are cool and inner-focused; sometimes rational, sometimes mystical. Dionysian religions are hot and body-focused; sometimes ecstatic, sometimes ritualistic.

Alternative spirituality is largely Apollonian in character though there are exceptions—pagans, for instance, may adopt an ecstatic approach with lots of drumming and dancing in their rituals. But as a generalisation it is broadly true—Simon Small notes that most people from the alternative spirituality scene have great difficulty with charismatic worship.

The dance/rave scene, on the other hand, is much more Dionysian. The very name of the psychotropic drug of choice—*ecstasy*—could be seen as a bit of a giveaway! Consider this anonymous description of an experience of using ecstasy for the first time in a club in Vancouver:

> *When we entered, I knew it was a special place - the good-vibe eye contact everyone was making with each other abounded. As I worked my way into the fierce house music that was throbbing the flesh all around me I stopped and absorbed exactly what I was feeling—connection. The wisp of another's hand, or finger by my body initiated a new bond within this mysterious culture—always followed-up by a comforting glance.*
>
> *I somehow worked my way into a whole new circle of people and experiences on the floor. From the corner of my head I sensed the warmth radiating from an older (probably early 50's) woman slightly detached from the people I was currently grooving with. We caught each other's eyes for what seemed like hours as we held still and allowed the room, the lights, the people, to just orbit around our perfectly still bodies. I silently mouthed to her "please dance with me". She silently mouthed back to me "I already was".*

> *This definitive point was the pivot-point for my evening. I truly understood at that infinitely microscopic point in time what it meant for myself (emotionally) and others to come together through such an act of raw, unplugged, uninhibited spirit.*

Robin Sylvan's study (2005) shows the breadth of spirituality in rave culture in the US and Europe. Many of the people he interviewed openly acknowledge the spiritual aspect:

> *There's a feeling of making a connection between different realms somehow and allowing a flow to happen between those worlds.* (Jason Keehn in Sylvan 2005:87)

While Michael Mahahan sounds quite Pauline:

> *I became a little less human and a little bit more spirit.* (Sylvan 2005:89)

Sylvan argues that raves are often heavily ritualised and explicitly spiritual. More and more raves begin and end with ceremonies and there seems to be a trend for constructing 'altars' to provide a physical focal point just as the DJ is a musical and spiritual focus. The role of the DJ as 'priest' is emphasised by a number of those interviewed in this study. One DJ, James Frazier, says:

> *Usually I will say a prayer to the universe, saying I just ask to be a vessel, you know, and get out of the way, and just to give as much as I can to those people that are here…There'll be situations where I've pulled the wrong record, but it turned out to be the right one. And I realize,* ***Oh, it's not me****; you know what I mean? It's like I'm doing this, I'm just a vessel, and it's doing itself.* (Sylvan 2005:116)

According to Sylvan, there are seven characteristics of rave culture (2005:11ff):

- *A combination of sacred and secular*—while many raves have a sense of the sacred, and even some explicitly religious components, there are also very strong secular aspects such as 'partying', entertainment, being seen in the right places, commercial gain, and so on. The two co-exist and participants don't usually find any conflict between them.
- *Expression within the arts*—music, dance and visual arts come together in a unique fusion in rave culture. Rave is seen as an aesthetic experience and top DJs have much kudos as creative artists.
- *Expression within popular culture*—raves are not elitist but cut across divisions in social class, gender and ethnicity. They also attract millions of people across the world. They connect strongly with many aspects of contemporary culture, being youth-oriented, focusing on experience, global in scope, and so on.
- *Emphasis on experience over content*—although rave is experienced as an aesthetic experience it is not viewed dispassionately but valued for the visceral quality of the experience. This experience is often enhanced with drugs such as MDMA (ecstasy)—a major difference from most other forms of alternative spirituality, which are very hostile to drug taking of any kind.
- *The central importance of the body*—the rave experience is an *embodied* experience; indeed it is a danced experience. This celebration of the physical is also uncharacteristic in most traditional and alternative forms of spirituality.
- *Use of digital technology, multimedia, and global communication systems*—raves tend to be hi-tech affairs. Lights, sound systems, video projectors and other optical effects play a key part in the rave experience. Rave culture is also firmly located within the nexus of the continuous communication networks (principally operating through the mobile phone) which characterise large sections of contemporary culture.

- *Postmodern, hybrid, cut-and-past nature*—raves draw from a range of sources. They are self-consciously not located in any one subculture or tradition but draw widely to produce self-constructed eclectic mix which is both new and old.

Given all this it is little wonder that the group *Faithless* can record a track entitled, *God is a DJ*!

Conclusions

The studies we have looked at in this session give us some sense of the key themes which underpin people's perceptions of religion and their approach to what we might call spirituality. Very few of those involved in the studies were over 45 and it is clear that the younger the people, the more distant they are likely to be from 'church'.

Some clear themes emerge but within them is a great diversity of shades of opinion—and what the individual might say in private can be quite different from what they might say in public. In the next session we will attempt to grapple with how we might connect with those who hold the views explored in this session and how we might share the truths of the gospel with them.

Session Three Notes—Contemporary Spirituality

Details of the first study can be found in Hay & Hunt 2000.

The term *bricolage* is used in Levi-Strauss 1966:16ff.

On the question of theodicy, see also Philip Pullman's hugely popular trilogy, *His Dark Materials*.

The Nick Spencer study can be found in Spencer 2002.

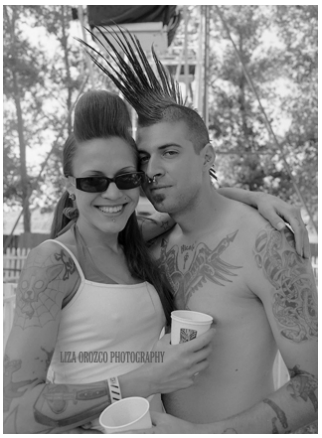
More details of the Generation Y research can be found in Savage et al 2006. For this session I used an unpublished summary of their research entitled *Theology Through the Arts for a New Generation* produced in November 2002.

Some other figures which shed some light on spirituality in contemporary Britain:

72% of population believe in God or 'Higher Power' (Social Trends 28, 1998)

I know that God really exists and I have no doubt about it	21%
While I have doubts, I feel that I do believe in God	23%
I find myself believing in God some of the time, but not at others	14%
I don't believe in a personal God, but I do believe in a Higher Power of some kind	14%
I don't know whether there is a God and I don't believe there is any way to find out	15%
I don't believe in God	10%
Not answered	3%

Music Lifestyles



(These notes are based on various Wikipedia entries.)

Punk: Punk rock (often referred to simply as punk) is an anti-establishment rock music genre and movement that developed between 1974 and 1976 in the US, UK and Australia. In reaction to the increasingly elaborate rock of the late 60s and early 70s, punk rock bands created fast, hard-edged music, typically with short songs, stripped-down instrumentation, and often political, anti-government lyrics. Punk embraces a DIY ethic, with many bands self-producing their recordings and distributing them through informal channels. By late 1976, bands such as the Ramones, in New York City, and the Sex Pistols and The Clash, in London, were recognized as the vanguard of a new musical movement.

By the beginning of the 1980s, even faster, more aggressive styles had become the predominant mode of punk rock. Musicians identifying with or inspired by punk also pursued a broad range of other variations, giving rise to post-punk and the alternative rock movement. By the turn of the century, new pop punk bands such as Green Day were bringing the genre widespread popularity decades after its inception.

Goth: By the late 1970s, there were a few post-punk bands in the United Kingdom labelled 'gothic.' However, it was not until the early 1980s that gothic rock became its own subgenre within post-punk, and that followers of these bands started to come together as a distinctly

recognizable movement. The scene appears to have taken its name from an article published in UK rock weekly *Sounds*: "The Face of Punk Gothique", written by Steve Keaton and published on February 21 1981. The opening of the Batcave in London's Soho in July 1982 provided a prominent meeting point for the emerging scene. The term 'Batcaver' was later used to describe old-school goths.

By the 1990s, the term 'goth' and the boundaries of the associated subculture had become more contentious. New subcultures emerged, or became more popular, some of them being conflated with the goth subculture by the general public and the popular media. This conflation was primarily owing to similarities of appearance, social customs, and the fashions of the subcultures, rather than the musical genres of the bands associated with them. As time went on, the term was extended further in popular usage, sometimes to define groups that had neither musical nor fashion similarities to the original gothic subculture.

The response of these newer groups to the older subculture varies. Some, being secure in a separate subcultural identity, express offence at being called 'goth' in the first place, while others choose to join the existing subculture on its own terms. Still others have simply ignored its existence, and decided to appropriate the term 'goth' themselves, and redefine the idea in their own image. Even within the original subculture, changing trends have added to the complexity of attempting to define precise boundaries.

Emo: In the mid-1980s, the term emo described a subgenre of hardcore punk which originated in the Washington, D.C. music scene. In later years, the term emocore, short for 'emotional hardcore', was also used to describe the emotional performances of bands in the Washington, D.C. scene and some of the offshoot regional scenes such as Rites of Spring, Embrace, One Last Wish, Beefeater, Gray Matter, Fire Party, and later, Moss Icon.

Starting in the mid-1990s, the term emo began to refer to those bands which followed the influences of Fugazi, with a more indie rock style of emo, more melodic and less chaotic. The so-called 'indie emo' scene survived until the late 1990s, as many of the bands either disbanded or shifted to mainstream styles. As a result, the term 'emo' became a vaguely defined identifier rather than a specific genre of music.

At the end of the 1990s, the underground emo scene had almost entirely disappeared. However, the term emo was still being bandied about in mainstream media, almost always attached to the few remaining 90s emo acts, including Jimmy Eat World.

2003 saw the success of Chris Carrabba, the former singer of emo band Further Seems Forever. Despite musically being more aligned to the singer songwriter school, Carraba found himself part of the emerging 'popular' emo scene. His music featured lyrics founded in deep diary-like outpourings of emotion. While certainly emotional, the new 'emo' had a far greater appeal amongst adolescents than its earlier incarnations.

At the same time, use of the term 'emo' expanded beyond the musical genre, which added to the confusion surrounding the term. The word 'emo' became associated with open displays of strong emotion. Common fashion styles and attitudes that were becoming idiomatic of fans of similar 'emo' bands also began to be referred to as 'emo.' As a result, bands that were loosely associated with 'emo' trends or simply demonstrated emotion began to be referred to as emo. The term has now become so broad that it has become nearly impossible to describe what exactly qualifies as 'emo'.

Alternative spirituality

Much of this section is based on notes taken by me at Simon Small's workshop on *Understanding Contemporary Spirituality*, held at the Norwich Centre for Christian Meditation on 1st March 2007.

Simon Small suggests that people only get involved in alternative spiritualities from the mid-teens onwards. The Gen Y survey covered people up to the age of 25. Although they found no 'God-shaped hole' this may be an age-related experience rather than particular to Generation Y. It would be interesting to track those born after 1982 and see whether they, too, find a sense of meaninglessness and alienation which leads them into a spiritual journey of some kind.

Rave spirituality

The anonymous quote comes from http://www.csp.org/nicholas/A66.html There are further resources on this site.

Following are the lyrics to dance act Faithless' track, *God Is A DJ*:

This is my church
This is where I heal my hurt

It's a natural grace
Of watching young life shape
It's in minor keys
Solutions and remedies
Enemies becoming friends
When bitterness ends
This is my church

This is my church
This is where I heal my hurt

This is my church

This is my church
This is where I heal my hurt

It's in the world I become
Content in the hum
Between voice and drum
It's in the church

The poetic justice of cause and effect
Respect, love, compassion

This is my church

This is where I heal my hurt
For tonight
god is a DJ
god is a DJ

See: http://net127.com/2003/03/24/this-is-where-i-heal-my-hurt

Further reading

Baigent 2003, *The Y Church Report*—report written for the Catholic diocese of Northampton. It looks at the cultural and faith worlds of young Catholics, and how effective youth ministry might be conducted.

Croft et al 2005, *Evangelism in a Spiritual Age* also contains some interesting material on contemporary spirituality, focusing on the 'Beyond the Fringe' research project carried out in the diocese of Coventry in 2003.

McQuillan 2004, *Youth Spirituality*—an Australian report looking at the spirituality of young people in Australia and the UK. He used David Hay's 'spiritual experience' questionnaire with a groups of pupils some mixed catholic schools and an all-boys independent school. In both groups the number of positive responses was very high.

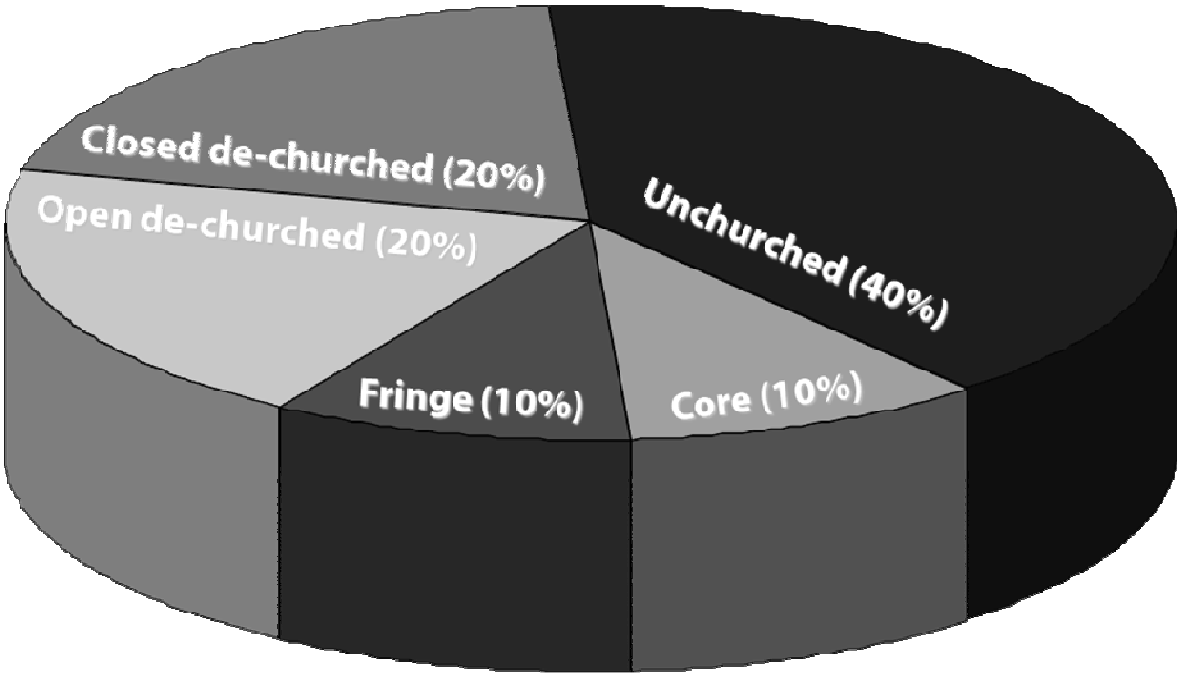
Rave Culture and Religion, edited by Graham St John, Routledge, 2004, may be worth reading (I haven't yet). See http://www.edgecentral.net/rcr.htm

Partridge 2004, *New Religions*—a comprehensive and readable guide to hundreds of movements of the spirit across the world.

Session Four—"I See You Are Very Religious": Mission in a Postmodern World

The context

Church attendance is an obvious, though not necessarily reliable, indicator of the health of the church. However, it is clear that attendances have been steadily declining in the West since the beginning of the 20th century. In 1998 Philip Richter and Leslie Francis published a book which looked at patterns of church attendance. Their findings are summarised in the chart below:



The categories are as follows:

Core—Attend about 5-8 times in a two month period

Fringe—Attend about 1-3 times in a two month period

Open dechurched—Those who have left church but are open to return if suitably contacted and invited.

Closed dechurched—Those who left church damaged or disillusioned and have no intention of returning.

Unchurched—Those who have no contact with the church except perhaps for the occasional wedding or funeral. The unchurched slice of the pie is getting bigger with each passing year.

(The recent Tearfund survey (Ashworth & Farthing 2007) gives a more complete breakdown of religious observance—see the notes to this session.)

The great commission today

The are several versions of the 'great commission' in the New Testament (Matthew 28:19-20, John 20:21-22 and Acts 1:8). George Lings (2006) of the Church Army has an interesting perspective on the commission from Acts. He notes the categories used by Richter and Francis and argues that this offers us a helpful model with which to understand the Acts 1:5 commission for our own time:

> *…you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*

Jerusalem	All Judea	Samaria	Ends of the Earth
Core	*Fringe*	*Dechurched*	*Unchurched*

Lings argues that most of the *Fresh Expressions* movement concentrates on the fringe and the open dechurched. Important though this work is, there is a danger that the unchurched are simply ignored. Yet this is the sector which is growing and so in the rest of this session we will focus especially on how we might connect with the unchurched in ways which are accessible to them and authentic to the gospel.

Evangelising Athens

Mars Hill (The Areopagus) in Athens

If the unchurched really do correspond to 'the ends of the earth' as Lings suggests, how are we to go about engaging with them. A good place to start is to look at how the apostle Paul went about things. Luke offers us two glimpses of Paul in action as an evangelist. The first is amongst the Jews of Antioch (Acts 13:14-43), the other amongst the pagans of Athens (Acts 17:16-34). In each case he used a very different approach but adopted a similar principle—*start where the people are*. So for the Jews of Antioch he started with the Bible, building on their knowledge of the faith and challenging them to grow as disciples.

The situation in Athens was different. Here Paul was the stranger in a strange land. He was, to use today's jargon, among the unchurched and what he did there can offer us an approach to presenting the gospel to the unchurched today. By taking a careful look at Luke's account it is possible to discern a number of key components in what Paul did in Athens which are relevant to us.

Listen and research

Paul is waiting in Athens and he observes the idols [v16]. Athens was renowned for having more gods than anywhere else in Greece. Paul has studied their art and culture and knows how the Athenians liked to spend their time.

Engage with the culture

Debate was the Athenians' preferred mode of discourse [21]. By adopting it Paul attempts to communicate with them in a way which was culturally relevant to them.

Avoid judgement

Paul is deeply distressed by the idols he sees [16] but he does not condemn the Athenians. Instead he saw that the abundance of idol worship was a way to engage them and a chance to build on where they were.

Show respect

Paul could have condemned the Athenians—he probably wanted to—but instead he says, "I see you are very religious." [22]

Sacralise the culture

In his speech on the Areopagus Paul quotes two Greek poets, both of whom were speaking of Zeus rather than Yahweh: "'In him [Zeus] we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we too are his [Zeus'] offspring.'" [28].

Don't mention 'religion'

At Antioch, Paul gives a long exposition of Biblical salvation history because that is what his listeners know. In Athens there is no mention of Moses or the scriptures (nor, for that matter, of sin or the cross).

Offer a new perspective

Paul takes an aspect of Athenian spiritual life, the unknown God, and offers a new interpretation [23-27]. It provides him with a way in which both acknowledges the prevailing culture and allows him to engage with it creatively.

When appropriate, challenge

Having acknowledged the strengths of Athenian spirituality and offered some new perspectives on it, Paul now introduces the ideas of repentance and resurrection, mentioning Jesus, though not by name [30-31].

Be prepared for ridicule and hostility

Resurrection is a step too far for many of Paul's listeners but he is well prepared for their negative reaction. He knew that, if he was prepared to engage respectfully with them, some would listen and want to know more [32].

Christianity Rediscovered

A series of events which had profound implications for the working out of this Pauline approach started in May 1966 when Vincent Donovan, a Catholic missionary in Africa, wrote to his Bishop:

> *Dear Bishop,*
>
> *I wonder if I could make some comments on the mission. There are four well-run, well-looked-after, expensive, non-aided schools attached to the mission. There is a small chapel. There is a hospital, extremely well built, fairly well attended, bringing in some mission revenue. The hospital and school take up an enormous amount of time, especially the hospital. It is common practice for the mission car, when it is called for, to pick up sick people at a distance and to bring them to the hospital, expenses being paid by the sick. This is happening on the average of once a week, with one of the priests in the mission doing the driving. In our four schools, religious instruction is for all students in the school.…The influence of the Catholic Mission is*

very strong in the whole Loliondo area…But the relationships with the Masai people have to do with schools, hospitals, or cattle. Many of the Masai have been helped materially by the mission. There are many instances of strong friendship-relationship between the Masai and the priests in the mission.

Masai kraals are visited very often…But never, or almost never, is religion mentioned on any of these visits. The best way to describe realistically the state of this Christian mission is the number zero. As of this month, in the seventh year of this mission's existence, there are no adult Masai practicing Christians from Loliondo mission.

The relationship with the Masai, in my opinion, is dismal, time consuming, wearying, expensive, and materialistic. There is no probability that one can speak with the Masai, even with those who are our friends, about God. And there is no likelihood that one could actually interest them to the point of their wanting to discuss or accept Christianity. In other words, the relationship with the Masai, except the school children, goes into every area except that very one area which is most dear to the heart of the missionary. On this one important point, there is no common ground with the Masai. It looks as if such a situation will go on forever.

Looking at these people around me, at these true pagans, I am suddenly weary of the discussions that have been going on for years in the mission circles of Europe and America, as to the meaning of missionary work, weary of the meetings and seminars devoted to missionary strategy.

I suddenly feel the urgent need to cast aside all theories and discussions, all efforts at strategy--and simply go to these people and do the work among them for which I came to Africa.

I would propose cutting myself off from the schools and the hospital, as far as these people are concerned—as well as the socializing with them—and just go and talk to them about God and the Christian message.

(…)

Outside of this, I have no theory, no plan, no strategy, no gimmicks—no idea of what will come. I feel rather naked. I will begin as soon as possible.

Sincerely,

Vince Donovan (1982:14ff)

So Donovan went to the Masai elders and asked if he could come and speak to them about God. He told them that he wanted nothing from them, not even their children for the mission school, and that he had nothing to give them, not even medicine for their sick. He had simply come to speak about God. Their response was, "If that is why you came here, why did you wait so long to come to us?"

It was slow patient work. He had no training but he learned to start from where they were, as did Paul in Antioch & Athens, and to learn from them and to work with them to develop a theology which was true to both the gospel and their experience. He learned the importance of understanding and operating through the culture of the Masai rather than the culture of the US from whence he came.

Donovan's experience is crucial to an understanding of the issues facing those who would work with the unchurched in our culture. The unchurched can think of no reason why they should come to church; why they should join a body with values, rituals, music

and cultural assumptions which are completely different to theirs—so they don't come. If there is to be mission amongst them it requires the missionary to go to them, listen to them, learn their culture and work with them to discover how to express the gospel in ways which are both culturally relevant and an authentic expression of the good news of Jesus.

The problem of sin

It is interesting that Paul did not mention sin in his Athens address (or, more accurately, if he did, Luke did not choose to tell us). The doctrine of sin has been at the heart of the church since the beginning—in his letters Paul makes much of it. It has been the driving force behind many a conversion. But today, the notion of sin seems to have lost much of its meaning. John Finney wanted to know if consciousness of sin had played a major part in people's conversion experience. So he asked a number of Christians:

> *During the period when you came to faith, which of the following describes how you felt:*
>
> *(a) I felt a general sense of guilt*
>
> *(b) I felt guilt or shame about something in particular*
>
> *(c) I had no sense of guilt or shame*
>
> *(d) Don't know*

Of those asked, 61% had no sense of guilt or shame. Of the remainder, 18% had felt guilty about something specific and 21% had a general sense of guilt. There was no difference between the sexes, and the older the respondent, the less likely they were to feel guilty (Finney 2004:49).

Finney also asked people to think about the time when they were in the process of becoming a Christian: "Did you find any parts of the Christian message particularly appealing?" Respondents could write in one thing of their choice. The answers are revealing:

God's love	14%
Particular Bible passages	13%
Forgiveness	13%
Death of Christ	8%
Life after death	8%
Helping other people	7%
God always there	6%
Jesus' life and example	5%
The resurrection	2%
Nothing in particular	16%

Again, he notes that only 21% mentioned sin or the cross, yet many of them came from evangelical churches. Four-fifths of those who came to faith did not mention the cross or forgiveness as most significant for them. Because of this, Finney argues that any approach to evangelism which majors on guilt or sin is likely to be ineffective today. Instead, the church should concentrate, as Paul did in Athens, on matters which resonate with the spirit of the age. He suggests that we would be better off concentrating on topics such as:

- *God as creator*—the invitation to worship with thanksgiving.
- *The God of hospitality*—the invitation to enjoy his company.
- *The God of mystery*—the invitation to explore that mystery.

- *The God of service*—the invitation to join in his work in a suffering world.
- *The God of laughter*—the invitation to enjoy life in him.
- *The God of ministry*—the invitation to let him work through us to others.
- *The God of glory*—the invitation to let him touch our lives with his glory.
- *The God of healing*—the invitation to let him touch our wounds.

Shame not sin

John Finney put guilt and shame together in his research questionnaire and then related them to sin. John Watson contrasts shame and guilt:

Shame (Focus on the self)	Guilt (Focus on the act)
What is wrong?	
Failure to meet expectations	Offence against legal expectations
Personal reaction	
• Embarrassment/disgrace • Self-deprecation • Fear of abandonment • Resentment • Self-isolation • Alienation	• Condemnation/remorse • Self-accusation • Fear of punishment • Anger • Self-justification • Hostility
Reaction of others	
• Exclude and ridicule • Disgrace and hold in contempt • Disapprove and reproach	• Blame and hold responsible • Accuse and condemn • Punish and retaliate
How to remedy the state/feeling	
• Learn to see 'who I am' in relation to others *Love banishes shame*	• Pay the price, then you will be restored *Justification banishes guilt*

(Watson 2005:10)

Atonement for a 'Sinless' Society

Alan Mann argues that postmodern people have been able to push away the notion of sin at the expense of a consequent emphasis on the self and its inadequacies, which he identifies as shame. Mann explores the notion of shame at some length, reviewing the literature. He brings out the sense of disconnectedness and alienation felt by someone suffering from shame:

> *The shamed person does not feel like a person because he or she does not feel connected, not only with 'Others' but, more importantly, within themselves. The shamed virtually terrorize themselves, convinced that not only have they not 'lived up to their own standards and ideals but actually experience themselves as* ***embodying the anti-ideal'.*** (2005:39—the quote is from Pattison 2000:77)

Mann focuses on the importance of story-telling in a postmodern age—especially the stories we tell about ourselves. He looks at narrative therapy which aims to help people tell a different story about themselves and suggests that Jesus is the ultimate narrative therapist, offering everyone the chance to participate in a radically new story in which shame is replaced by a sense of being loved and being lovable.

The kingdom kerygma

Focusing on shame rather than sin might be part of the answer but what else should be part of our message to the unchurched? Each age is called upon to present the gospel in a way which both fits and challenges that age. This gives rise to a double-bind: if the fit is too great, the gospel will get lost in a comfortable conformation to the world; if the challenge is too great the message will never be heard and it will not be possible to transform the world (Ro 12:2).

The emerging church is the movement which is doing most to engage directly with contemporary culture. Its main message is focused around what we might term the kerygma of kingdom. Kerygma is the Biblical Greek term usually translated as preaching or proclamation. Biblical scholars also use it to describe the content or message which is preached.

The New Testament scholar, C. H. Dodd, reconstructed what he saw as the kerygma of the early church in the Acts of the Apostles. In outline it looks like this:

> *The prophecies are fulfilled, and the new Age is inaugurated by the coming of Christ.*
> *He was born of the seed of David.*
> *He died according to the Scriptures, to deliver us out of the present evil age.*
> *He was buried.*
> *He rose on the third day according to the Scriptures.*
> *He is exalted at the right hand of God, as Son of God and Lord of quick and dead.*
> *He will come again as Judge and Saviour of men.* (Dodd 1964)

Today's emerging church follows a number of distinguished scholars in making a focus on Jesus' teaching about the kingdom of God (Matthew has 'kingdom of heaven', John has 'eternal life'). They would not dissent from Dodd's exposition, above, but would want to change some of the emphases. For instance, there is nothing in Dodd's summary between the birth and death of Jesus. This may have been appropriate in the apostolic age but today the kerygma needs to be emphasised differently.

Many in the emerging church, for instance, would start with the fact of Jesus' incarnation and perhaps impute to that event the start of Christ's mission to "deliver us out of the present evil age". They would certainly want to focus on Jesus' life and teaching—the unspoken 'gap' between his birth and death in the apostolic kerygma (note how it is largely missing from the apostolic epistles).

By focusing on Jesus' programme of revolutionary revolution (not just a revolution but a different kind of revolution) they would aim to set forth his teachings in ways which challenge and engage contemporary sensibilities.

In conversation with Jonny Baker of *Grace*, an emerging church in Ealing, we agreed that the emerging church kerygma would also focus on creation, Jesus' table fellowship with outsiders and an emphasis on 'actualising' the kingdom by trying to live as Jesus commanded. It is also unlikely to have a neat linear form such as that suggested by Dodd.

Happiness

We saw in session three that Savage, Collins and Mayo discovered what they call a 'happy midi-narrative' prevalent the amongst Generation-Y people they interviewed. The importance of happiness goes way beyond those born after 1975. "As long as it makes you happy" is a phrase heard time and again in popular drama, especially soaps.

What is the church's response to this? By and large it is to disparage the quest for happiness as 'superficial' or 'conformed to the world' (how many sermons have you heard, or even preached, about the evils of the 'commercialisation of Christmas'?). After all, goes the argument, the gospel is not about success or 'feeling good', it is about salvation to eternal life; the world's pursuit of happiness is just selfish materialism.

Not only is this hardly in the spirit of, "I see you are very religious", it also misunderstands both the nature of happiness and, perhaps, what Jesus had in mind when he proclaimed the good news of the kingdom.

Yet, if so many people are seeking happiness, the implication is that they have not found it. Most people can distinguish between happiness and transitory pleasure and they are usually looking for something more than a short-term emotional high. What they actually seek could often be better described by words such as *joy* or *peace* (look in the visitors' book of any open church—you will find words like *peace*, *tranquillity*, *calm* and so on).

The church seems ill-equipped to respond to this expressed need yet the gospel is all about well-being and happiness. If we live right and are in right relationship with God we will have deep joy and peace which will often, though not always, bubble up as happiness. Instead of disparaging the quest for happiness perhaps we should acknowledge its deep spiritual roots and start using this language in our conversations with others.

Is apologetic appropriate?

Deciding whether to focus on sin or shame is a decision about *content*. We also need to consider what sort of *style* of evangelism might be appropriate and effective with unchurched postmodern people. Apologetics, the systematic defence of a position, has been the mainstay of evangelistic style for many years. At its crudest form it goes something like this:

- All have sinned (Ro 3:23)
- The wages of sin is death (Ro 6:23)
- **Therefore**, all are destined for death
- **But**, all who believe in Jesus will have eternal life (Jn 3:16)
- You want to live, don't you?
- **So**, you must believe in Jesus. *QED*.

Of course, most evangelists are more subtle than this but the argument remains the same. We've seen there is a problem with the notion of sin but suppose we could reframe the basic argument in terms of shame, or something else which makes sense to contemporary unchurched people, just as Vince Donovan did with the Masai. Would apologetic then be an appropriate way of engaging with unchurched people? Something like this, perhaps:

- All feel shame
- The wages of shame is humiliation
- **Therefore**, all are destined for humiliation
- **But**, God so loved the world… (Jn 3:16)
- You want to be loved and valued, don't you?
- **So**, you must believe in Jesus. *QED*.

Peter Rollins, a philosophy lecturer and one of the leaders of Ikon, an emerging church in Belfast, argues (2006) that there is a more fundamental problem. He identifies two kinds of Christian apologetic, based on either word or wonder. The first is like my parody above,

attempting to build a watertight logical case to convince people that Christianity is compelling and must be accepted by any reasonable person. The second kind, based on wonder, builds a case based on miraculous healings and other forms of 'power evangelism'.

Rollins argues that the apologetic approach is both inappropriate for contemporary people, who have a mistrust of such "I know better than you" arguments and is also against the spirit of Paul's words to the church at Corinth:

> *When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God.* (1Co 2:1-5)

Rollins continues:

> *Unlike the traditional mode of preaching, which seeks to persuade and clarify, this discourse maintains the object of communication as obscure and unobjectifiable. Instead of closing thought down—by telling people what they ought to think—this discourse opens up thought. Unlike the discourse of apologetics and the discourse of the miracle (which each attempt to forcibly bring people to their knees), the discourse of Paul acts as an aroma.* (Rollins 2006:36)

Jesus, notes Rollins, was not philosophically consistent. He said different things to different people and refused to offer either word or sign to those who demanded them. His miracles were performed out of love rather than a demonstrations to convince the faithless. Jesus offers hints rather than directives, especially when he is speaking or acting in parables.

What did Jesus do?

So, if apologetic is not appropriate today, might Jesus offer us a model to follow? His proclamation of the gospel seems to have had a number of elements which we might do well to adopt:

- *Jesus told stories*—Jesus' use of parables was surely significant. One of the features of a parable is that it is 'parabolic'—the meaning is not closed and predictable (as it would be if it were circular or elliptical) but just as you think you've got close to it, it veers away. The parable invites people in, to explore its meaning with the teacher. It is not dogmatic, insisting on only one 'true' interpretation. It does not present 'the truth' but a glimpse of the truth. Worse still, it invites personal encounter and transformation rather than the transfer of head knowledge.
- *Jesus asked questions*—Jesus asked lots of provocative questions, especially when he was questioned. His questions were always designed to offer another perspective from the one the listener brought. Even when the dispute was at its fiercest his questions took things to a different level.
- *Jesus gave 'impossible' challenges*—the Sermon on the Mount contains lots of impossible challenges: never judge, love enemies, give to all who ask, and so on. Jesus surely was absolutely serious when he said these things but surely not naïve enough to believe that his listeners (ourselves included) would be able to put them into practice easily. Instead, we may think that he was offering us 'provocative propositions' which point the way to kingdom living. Yes, they are commandments, but like an icon, they point beyond themselves to reveal the nature of God's kingdom.

- *Jesus acted out the new paradigm*—Jesus lived, and died, in the kingdom way. He 'walked the talk', as they say today. Such authenticity of living is what the church today is often accused of lacking. Whether or not the accusation is true, if we are to be effective in presenting the gospel we must do it with our whole lives and not just our lips. Part of Jesus' 'acting out' included signs and wonders. Many of these seem to have had a parabolic nature—opening the ears of those who cannot hear or the eyes of those who cannot see, and so on. (For a further discussion of this approach to the miracles, see McLaren 2006: 55-66)

These four aspects of Jesus' ministry offer a compelling approach to proclaiming the gospel to today's unchurched generation. They offer a better chance of being effective than any traditional apologetic. To return to Peter Rollins:

> *In a world where people believe that they are not hungry, we must not offer food but rather an aroma that helps them desire the food that we cannot provide. We are a people who are born from a response to hints of the divine. Not only this, but we must embrace the idea that we are also called to be hints of the divine.* (Rollins 2006:36)

How (not) to do evangelism

This leads to a radically different approach to evangelism. For instance, Bryan Webster, pastor of the Cottage Beck café church in Scunthorpe has a similar approach. The café is open from 11:00 to 18:00 three days a week and is specifically aimed at the closed dechurched, perhaps the hardest group to reach. The café started as a result of asking people in the neighbourhood what they needed. A meeting place seemed to best meet the needs.

They don't advertise because they don't want too many customers—their goal is to have time to build relationships with people. There is also a key rule in the café: it is forbidden to talk about God or religion. Bryan says,

> *The fact that we will not talk about God there annoys people. It annoys the unbelievers because they'll ask a question and we'll say, "Well we don't really talk about God here." And they've never had that before…and they'll say, "Where can we?" and eventually they'll persuade us to come to their home. And even then, if they say, "Will you come round?" I say, "Well, yes, some time…"*

Peter Rollins (2006:53) tells of the way his emerging church, Icon, has set up an Evangelism Project. Groups of Icon members go to other groups, both within and outside the church, not to evangelise them but to learn and 'be evangelised'. They go with no 'message' but find that their openness to others actually leads to more opportunities to share faith. Because there is no 'us' and 'them' in the encounter; because they asking rather than telling; learning rather than teaching, they find that they are better able to engage with others.

This approach may well resonate strongly with those exploring 'alternative spiritualities'. For them, as we saw in session three, the sense of journey and inquiry is important. As long as the church is seen as arrogant, dogmatic and self-righteous it will not be heard or respected as summed up in this quote from a seeker:

> *A religious person uses God, a spiritual person enjoys God.*

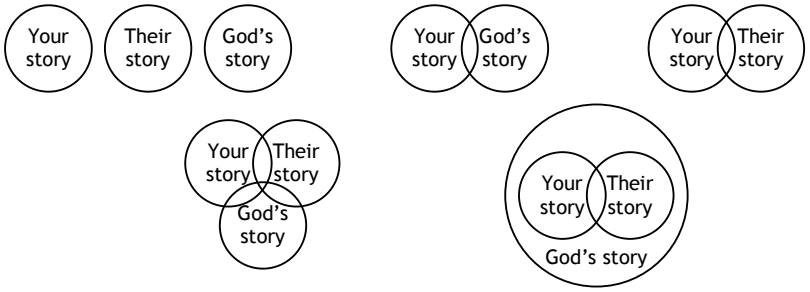
But an evangelism which is itself inquiring; which seeks to come alongside others in their journey in a position of powerlessness and service will not only be true to the gospel but will also stand a much better chance of connecting with the unchurched.

Relationship

One of the keys to effective mission is relationship building. In a postmodern world, as we have seen, appeals to authority are unlikely to be heeded. Instead, it is personal testimony which seems to hold weight. Roy Crowne and Bill Muir (2003) offer one approach to connecting which they call 'Three Story Living'. They argue that it can lead to a natural and authentic sharing of the gospel.

The three stories are 'my story', 'my friend's story' and 'God's story'. They argue that we must start by honestly sharing as much of our own story as seems appropriate. In time this will lead to a context of trust where our friend feels confident enough to share something of his or her own story. As this story unfolds hurts and longings will be exposed. It is into these that you will be able to share God's story with its message of hope and reconciliation.

In other words, until genuine trusting friendship is created, there is no point to sharing the gospel. Conversely, when trust has been established, it is wrong to withhold the gospel. Applied wrongly, this sort of approach can be mechanical and manipulative but by focusing on genuine relationship it highlights the importance of starting where people are and introduction Jesus as a 'third circle' which may in time overlap with both you and your friend (adapted from Crowne & Muir 2003:89):



Laurence Singlehurst offers a similar perspective: "In a postmodern world, people don't want to know our truth until they have had a glimpse of our hearts." (2006:13). He argues that there are three stages to evangelism: sowing, reaping and keeping. Each needs a different approach and each needs to be done in an appropriate way.

The language barrier

Finally, consider language. We are aware of the language barrier in church services. Many younger new Christians refuse to go to Book of Common Prayer services because the language is so alien to them. Similar barriers can exist when we try to have conversations with unchurched people. Sooner or later we will need to refer to the Bible. But what version should we use? Most modern translations are more concerned with accuracy than drama (that is, they tend towards formal equivalence rather than dynamic equivalence) and are thus harder for the unchurched to enter.

Paraphrases, such as Eugene Petersen's *The Message* or Rob Lacey's *the liberator* offer a much more accessible introduction to the message of the Bible. They might not be ideal for detailed study but they often convey the excitement of the text in ways which more standard translations can not. Be sensitive to those with whom you are engaging; which version would work best for them?

Consider a passage from the Sermon on the Plain (Lu 6:37-38):

> *Judge not, and ye shall not be judged: condemn not, and ye shall not be condemned: forgive, and ye shall be forgiven: Give, and it shall be given unto you; good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over, shall men give into your bosom. For with the same measure that ye mete withal it shall be measured to you again.* (AV)
>
> *Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.* (NRSV)
>
> *Don't pick on people, jump on their failures, criticize their faults— unless, of course, you want the same treatment. Don't condemn those who are down; that hardness can boomerang. Be easy on people; you'll find life a lot easier. Give away your life; you'll find life given back, but not merely given back—given back with bonus and blessing. Giving, not getting, is the way. Generosity begets generosity.* (The Message)
>
> *Don't sit in judgement over people. 'Cos soon enough, the tables will swivel and you'll be the one getting the verdict handed down. Don't set yourself up as a life and death critic 'cos soon enough someone will be writing the review from Hades on your precious lifework. Wipe the slate clean for others and you'll get the same treatment for **your** mess. Give and you'll get given—loads, compacted and piled into your lap, and then more on top so that it's spilling onto the floor. 'Cos it's very much in-the-style-of you: how you've been with people—you'll get the same treatment coming back round full circle."* (the liberator)

Four translations, each appropriate for a different audience. We do well to choose the one which will speak best to our listeners, regardless of whether it is our own personal choice. As an example, a baptism in Loddon corresponded with the end of a sermon series on stewardship. The vicar, Nigel Evans, decided to preach the stewardship sermon anyway. He chose Matthew 6:25-34 as one of his texts and read it from *The Message*. At the end of the service several of the baptism party (all unchurched) remarked on the power of the reading and asked him to send them a copy.

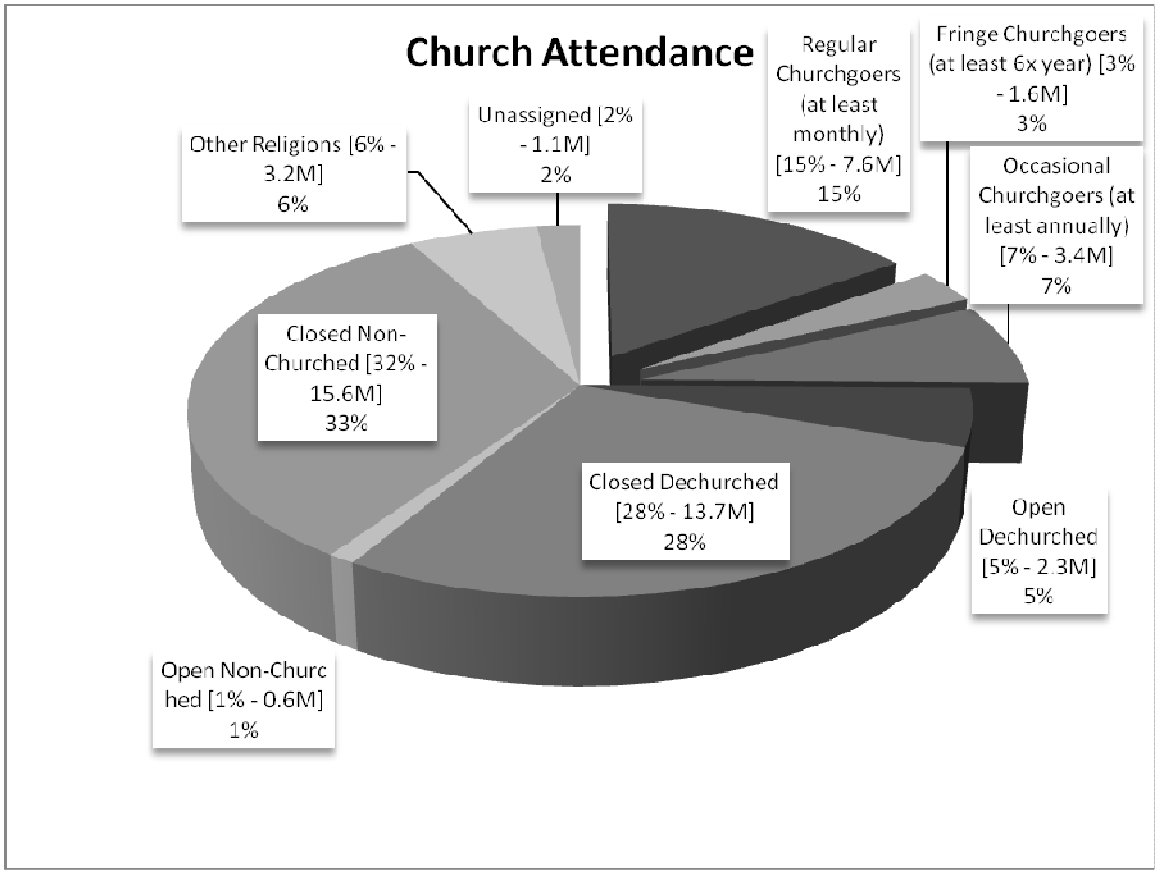
Summary

In this session we have looked at the importance of respectful inquiry in our approach to evangelism today. We have seen that some of the key categories in the traditional presentation of the faith no longer resonate with our listeners and that we might better engage with the unchurched if we emphasise creation, happiness, spirituality, incarnation and Jesus' call to a different way of life.

Session Four Notes—"I See You Are Very Religious"

Churchgoing Today

In 2007 Tearfund published a comprehensive survey of churchgoing and attitudes to church. Jacintha Ashworth & Ian Farthing interview 7000 people and classified them in a somewhat different way from Richter & Francis. Their results are summarised in the chart below:



Acts 1:5

The exegesis of Acts 1:5 can be found in Lings 2006, one of his *Encounters on the Edge* series, which is invaluable for keeping up with what is happening on the mission front in Britain at present. For £15 per annum you get four issues filled with case studies, good ideas and provocative insights into modern mission. See http://www.encountersontheedge.org.uk/ for more details.

Evangelising Athens

Paul quotes from *Cretica*, a poem by Epimenides, the semi-mythical 6th century BCE poet. In it, Minos addresses Zeus:

> *They fashioned a tomb for you, O holy and high one—*
> *The Cretans, always liars, evil beasts, idle bellies!*
> *But you are not dead: you live and abide forever,*
> ***For in you we live and move and have our being.***

Paul also quoted the Stoic philosopher Aratus of Soli (fl. 315 - 240 BCE)

From Zeus let us begin;
him do we mortals never leave unnamed;
full of Zeus are all the streets and all the market-places of men;
full is the sea and the havens thereof; always we all have need of Zeus.
For we are also his offspring;
and he in his kindness unto men gives favourable signs
and wakens the people to work, reminding them of livelihood.
*(*Introduction to *Phenomena)*

(For more, see http://www.geocities.com/astrologysources/classicalgreece/phaenomena/)

The problem of sin

Finney's research was published in *Finding Faith Today* (1996). The survey asked 511 Christians from all mainstream denominations a range of questions about their faith.

Narrative Therapy

For more on narrative therapy see this article by Michael White, one of the founders of narrative therapy: http://www.massey.ac.nz/~alock/virtual/white.htm

Kingdom Kerygma

The early church kerygma, as reconstructed by C. H. Dodd (1964) can also be found online at http://www.religion-online.org/showchapter.asp?title=539&C=606

Happiness

An edition of the Bible Society's *The Bible in Transition* (Sunderland 2006) explores some of these issues in more depth.

A new apologetic?

Rollins, Peter 2006, *How (Not) to Speak of God*, London: SPCK.

The four aspects of Jesus' ministry were first proposed in this form in a talk on change in complex systems given at Ashridge Management College by Richard Seel in 1998.

Cottage Beck Café Church

The Bryan Webster interview can be found at
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ix6RI9Jm88k

Further reading

Hunter 2000, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism*—looks at the methods of missionaries like St Patrick, arguing that many of their methods are appropriate for a postmodern generation. Hunter shows the differences between the Celtic and Roman approaches and suggests that the Celts relied on hospitality and a group-based outreach. They were offering an atmosphere of constant prayer (though specific prayers for many of life's daily tasks), a radical understanding of the culture of those amongst whom they worked and an acknowledgement of the 'excluded middle' (from "The Flaw of the Excluded Middle" by Paul Heibert, *Missiology: An International Review* 10:1, 1982, which argues that enlightenment Christianity focuses only on earth (realm of reason) and heaven (realm of sacred) and ignores the middle ground (realm of superstition). Yet increasingly, the new age is offering people solace here. The church should offer authentic comfort by engaging with people where they are now, just as the Celtic missionaries did.

Session Five—A Kaleidoscope of Meaning: Reading the Bible Today

After all the modernist criticism of the Bible in the last 150 years, from Schleiermacher to the Jesus Seminar, can the Bible still have a place in the life of the 21st century church? And even if it can survive the onslaught of modernism, surely it will wither away in the face of postmodern deconstruction and the general challenge to any kind of authority. *Prima scriptura* (Scripture first), let alone *sola scriptura* (only Scripture) must surely be a red rag to the unchurched?

Some might argue so, but we should not be surprised to see that the Bible can retain its power and authority in contemporary Western culture. We may need to learn to read it in culturally appropriate ways; we may even need to unlearn the culturally inappropriate ways in which we have been reading it; but the Bible remains just as potent for mission and discipleship today as it ever did.

In this session we will look at some ways of reading the Bible which offer the possibility of engaging authentically with people who are attuned to contemporary culture.

What does the Bible say about God?

Let us start with a simple question: what does the Bible say about God? The answer is not simple or harmonious. The Bible tells us of a warrior God (Is 63) and a peacemaker God (Le 26:6, Is 11:6); a God who never changes (Nu 23:19) and a God whose mind can be altered by argument or bribery (Ge 18:23ff); a God who is always watching his people (Is 49:15) and a God who falls asleep (Ps 44:23) or is in danger of forgetting his own words (Ge 9:16); a God who made everything good (Ge 1:31) and a God who created evil (Is 45:7); a God who creates division (Ge 11:6) and a God who wants to bring all peoples together (Is 60:1ff).

As Peter Rollins points out (2006:13), the interesting thing is not so much that all these contradictions exist but that the writers and editors of the Bible knew that they existed—and did nothing to 'harmonise' them. They were, apparently, quite content with this multi-faceted picture of God—and rightly so, since no one picture could possibly do justice to the fullness of the divine creator of the universe.

However, this does pose a difficulty for excessively modernist readings of scripture. If you believe that there is one absolute truth *and* that reason is capable of grasping and demonstrating that truth then having all these contradictory pictures in the Bible is surely a problem.

A postmodern perspective sees no such difficulty. Of course, there are lots of ways of seeing; they depend on the perspective of the writer and the reader. A cynic might argue that this internal lack of consistency points to the absence of any absolute truth underpinning the text. A realist will argue that the opposite is true: the text offers us a number of windows onto the divine, illuminating its unknowability in ways which enable us to grasp and apprehend something of its infinitely diverse nature. On this view scripture is like an icon—to use it properly we must not let our gaze rest upon it but must instead look *through* it to the deeper truth it reveals.

This latter way of reading the Bible is likely to be much more accessible to contemporary unchurched people than traditional approaches and it is this which we will explore further in this session.

Is there a metanarrative?

But first, is there a Biblical metanarrative; a 'grand story' which starts with Adam, climaxes with Jesus and ends with the new heaven and new earth? Many people think so. Even Brian McLaren, often identified with 'postmodern Christianity' seems to think so. His book, *The Story We Find Ourselves In* (2003), contains an exposition of the grand story in seven parts—Creation, Crisis, Calling (of Abraham & Jews), Conversation (with priests, prophets, poets & philosophers), Christ, Community (of the church) and Consummation.

But there is a problem with this scheme. For if you ask for chapter and verse for this grand story we cannot answer. The Bible is actually made up of lots of little stories; there is no grand story to be found anywhere within its pages (though passages like Psalm 78 attempt to tell part of it). Sometimes an editorial hand has attempted, with varying degrees of skill and according to conventions which may not always be ours, to stitch together some of the little stories into a bigger story. Mark's repeated use of 'and' (*kai*) to link stories is a good example—perhaps it should be translated as, "and another thing…"

The grand story is a tale constructed, not by any of the Biblical authors or redactors, but by later commentators (Christian commentators—the Jewish grand story is rather different from our own). It is their attempt to make sense of the patchwork of tales which make up what we call the Bible—and it is very useful. But it is important to remember that the grand narrative is read out of the Bible; if we then use it as we read back into the Bible we are in danger of swamping the text with our own interpretations.

Power and narrative

David Boje wrote a fascinating paper about storytelling in the Disney Corporation in which he shows that some stories (about the heroic contribution of Walt Disney etc.) are permitted and encouraged while others (such as how Webb Smith pioneered the famous Disney storyboarding technique) are prohibited. Boje points out the role of power in deciding which stories may be told and which are suppressed.

Something similar can work with the church's use of its grand stories. For instance, consider John 5:28-29:

> *"Do not be astonished at this; for the hour is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and will come out—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation." (NRSV)*

Taken at face value this says quite clearly that those who have done good will be resurrected to life and those who haven't will be resurrected to condemnation. But we find it hard to 'hear' this reading because it appears to be in conflict with a grand story about 'justification by faith'. So those of us who accept the justification by faith grand story (which is also not to be found in the Bible in the pure form in which it is usually presented) will discount or explain away passages such as this.

Of course, those who see a 'salvation by works' metanarrative will give it great importance but they might be inclined to gloss over passages such as Romans 3:28:

> *For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law.*

Either way, it seems hard to read the Bible without doing damage to our preferred metanarrative or to hold to our preferred metanarrative without doing damage to the Bible. The power of our own received orthodoxy may actually be constraining our ability to read

the Bible. The unchurched, with no religious orthodoxy to guide them will spot the clashes soon enough. Will we be ready to respond?

Defences against anxiety

The modernist quest for a biblical truth which is simple, rational and accessible to all has borne much fruit. But it has also led to the invisibility of a lot of scripture. A postmodern perspective, especially if used alongside a modern one, can help restore much of the richness which has been lost.

It is also possible to see modernist approaches to biblical interpretation, whether they rely on the magisterium of the church to hold the truth or on the literalist assumptions of fundamentalism, can act as a defence against anxiety. If we accept that the Bible is the word of God and also accept that it is full of ambiguities and contradictions, can we manage to live in a world where God speaks so paradoxically? Better, surely, to resolve the paradoxes, clear up the ambiguities, and harmonise the contradictions. Then we can be comfortable in our small certainties.

A postmodern approach, on the other hand, shakes us out of our comfort zone and propels us back into the maelstrom of Biblical confusion. But it holds out the promise that through this torrent of earthquake, wind and fire, the small voice of God will be heard more clearly and more richly.

Taking the mini-narrative seriously

A postmodern reading (see, e.g. Brueggemann 1993) would read each 'little story' with equal seriousness and let any subsequent understanding emerge from the interactions between our readings of the multiplicity of little stories. Some would argue that this is actually treating the text of Scripture with the seriousness it demands. It could be claimed that approaches such as harmonisation and letting scripture interpret scripture dishonour the text in ways which would often be alien to the writers (was the author of Chronicles embarrassed at the differences with Kings? Did Matthew blanche because his version of the entry to Jerusalem was different from Mark's?). Brueggemann offers a number of reflections on reading the little stories (1993:58ff):

- A focus on the little story requires us to try to be free of prior theological assumptions. As we saw in the case of John 5:28, earlier, prior assumptions often lead to the 'lesser text' being discounted. Brueggemann argues that we should honour the lesser text, as Paul urges us to honour the lesser members of the body.
- A focus on the little story means discarding much that modern critical scholarship takes for granted. Scholars have developed a set of rationalist tools for deciding what is authentic and what is not (the Jesus Seminar is an extreme example). But the outcome of such critical work is often to provide a text which is palatable to modern sensibilities. In the process much that is most difficult, and therefore with the most potential, is lost.
- A focus on the little text requires us to try to recover an insight into the Jewish world view which underpins it. Modern systematic approaches to the text have led us to adopt Hellenistic modes of rationality which do serious justice to these Jewish ways of thought. By denying and dismissing the oddity of the text we lose valuable insights into the nature of God and creation.

The 'little texts' approach to reading the Bible has a number of implications (1993:71ff):

- These texts do not need to be explained or justified. They only need to be told as resources for the imagination.
- Such telling, without explanation or rationalisation, is easier than the more complicated reasonableness in which we are schooled.
- Such simple expositions may enable us to handle 'difficult' texts, not because they are true but simply because they are *our* texts, and must be voiced. Having voiced them, we must then be prepared to let them transform our understanding of other texts which we think we have fully grasped.
- That as we undertake this unguarded telling we move closer to the voice of the rabbis who offered reality one text at a time. We learn to break with modernist pretensions which want large, settled, coherent truths.

Multivocalic Bible Study

Another postmodern theme is that some voices are privileged, to the detriment of the whole. So when we look at a passage of scripture, when we ask the question, "What does this passage mean?" we are expecting a single, simple answer. Yet in doing so we may be in danger of suppressing some voices and exalting others.

An alternative might be to adopt a 'multivocalic' approach to Bible study, to be open to different voices and to allow the Spirit to enable meaning to emerge from the interaction of the different perspectives. Instead of seeking *the* meaning as if it were an immutable fact locked within the words of the passage, we simply seek meaning through dialogue and prayer. In some ways this approach shares a spirit with *lectio divina* (see below), in that each seeks to discern the meaning of the text as it is revealed to us today.

For example, the story of the Levite's concubine in Judges 19 is challenging, perplexing and disturbing to us. It is usually omitted from lectionaries and so is not as well known as it might otherwise be. There seem to be a number of possible 'meanings': it might be about the contrast between too much hospitality and too little; or about gender relations in ancient Israel; or the use and abuse of power; or how local events reflect wider political tensions; and so on. Instead of focusing on just one theme, multivocalic Bible study invites people to work in small groups, each choosing one possible perspective and exploring it as if it was the only way to read the text. When engaging with the passage, they will attempt to see everything through the lens of their given perspective. The groups then share their perspectives and see what emerges as the different accounts collide. (See the notes for a fuller outline of the method.)

Lectio Divina

The practice of lectio divina, or holy reading, goes back to Origen in the third century. Many of the monastic orders used it as an approach to the Bible. It isn't so much Bible *study* as Bible *encounter*. In around 1150 the Carthusian monk Guigo II, wrote a book entitled "The Monk's Ladder" (Scala Claustralium) wherein he set out the theory of the four rungs: reading (*lectio*), meditation (*meditatio*), prayer (*oratio*) and contemplation (*contemplatio*). Some modern writers, such as Jan Johnson, reverse the order of the final two stages, ending in prayer. Lectio divina can be done as a solo spiritual discipline but it is also commonly used as a group activity. This is Guigo's introductory summary of his approach:

> *Reading, Lesson, is busily looking on Holy Scripture with all one's will and wit. Meditation is a studious insearching with the mind to know what was before concealed through desiring proper skill. Prayer is a devout desiring of the heart to*

get what is good and avoid what is evil. Contemplation is the lifting up of the heart to God tasting somewhat of the heavenly sweetness and savour. Reading seeks, meditation finds, prayer asks, contemplation feels.

In practice this will work out something like this:

- *Reading*—a passage is selected and is then read aloud; often slowly, sometimes more than once. ***Lectio*** is reverential listening; listening both in a spirit of silence and of awe. We are listening for the still, small voice of God that will speak to us personally; not loudly, but intimately. In ***lectio*** we read slowly, attentively, gently listening to hear a word or phrase that is God's word for us this day.
- *Meditating*—once we have found a word or a passage in the Scriptures that speaks to us in a personal way, we must take it in and "ruminate" on it. Through *meditatio* we allow God's word to become His word for us, a word that touches us and affects us at our deepest levels.
- *Praying*—prayer is understood both as dialogue with God, that is, as loving conversation with the One who has invited us into His embrace; and as consecration, prayer as the priestly offering to God of parts of ourselves that we have not previously believed God wants. In this ***oratio***, this consecration-prayer, we allow our real selves to be touched and changed by the word of God.
- *Contemplating*—finally, we simply rest in the presence of the One who has used His word as a means of inviting us to accept His transforming embrace. No one who has ever been in love needs to be reminded that there are moments in loving relationships when words are unnecessary. It is the same in our relationship with God. Once again we practice silence, letting go of our own words; this time simply enjoying the experience of being in the presence of God. (Adapted from Dysinger, 1990)

The classical approach to *lectio divina* is perhaps best suited to individual study. In groups the following is very effective:

Listening for the Gentle Touch of Christ the Word *(The Literal Sense)*

1. *One person reads aloud (twice)* the passage of scripture, as others are attentive to some segment that is especially meaningful to them.
2. **Silence** for 1-2 minutes. Each hears and silently repeats a word or phrase that attracts.
3. Sharing aloud: [A word or phrase that has attracted each person]. A simple statement of one or a few words. *No elaboration*.

How Christ the Word speaks to ME *(The Allegorical Sense)*

4. *Second reading* of same passage by another person.
5. **Silence** for 2-3 minutes. Reflect on "Where does the content of this reading touch my life today?"
6. Sharing aloud: **Briefly**: "I hear, I see..."

What Christ the Word Invites me to DO *(The Moral Sense)*

7. *Third reading* by still another person.
8. **Silence** for 2-3 minutes. Reflect on "I believe that God wants me to . . . . . today/this week."

9. Sharing aloud: at somewhat greater length the results of each one's reflection. [Be especially aware of what is shared by the person to your left.]

After full sharing, pray for the person to your left.

If instead of sharing with the group you prefer to pray silently, simply state this aloud and conclude your silent prayer with *Amen*.
(Dysinger 1990)

Note: although the prayer should move clockwise around the group, during the other phases it is best to allow people to speak when they are ready, in no particular order. This relieves pressure from those who find sharing difficult. The leader must discern when all who wish to have spoken and move on to the next phase.

Ignatian Approaches to the Bible

The *Spiritual Exercises* of St Ignatius uses an approach to the Bible which is proving effective with contemporary people even when used in isolation from the disciplined approach outlined in the book.

Ignatius invites people to use their imagination to put themselves into the Bible passage they are reading. The approach is seen most graphically in the meditation on hell:

The first point will be to see with the eyes of the imagination those great fires and the souls in bodily form in the fire.

The second point is to listen to the screamings, cries, groans and blasphemies against Christ our Lord, and against all his saints.

The third point is to smell the smoke, the sulphur, the filth and the corruption of hell.

The fourth point is to taste the bitter things, such as tears, sadness and the agony of conscience.

The fifth point is to feel with the sense of touch how those fires touch and burn the souls.

(Backhouse 1989:20)

This particular example is not likely to appeal to contemporary culture (though horror film aficionados might be an exception) but the principle of holistic engagement with scripture has potential.

Another Ignatian imaginative approach is to identify as fully as possible with a character in a story. Indeed, the passage can be 'read' a number of different times with a different character singled out each time (Mary, Martha and Jesus, for instance). However, the Exercises are intended for solo silent use, usually on retreat with a retreat director or guide. Their use in groups needs some further experiment.

Bible Study without Bibles

Janet Lees is a URC minister and a speech therapist. She encourages people to do Bible study without reference to any printed texts, relying instead on the own recollections of the text (Lees 2007). In this approach the first step is for the group to construct a remembered text. Lees recommends a variety of approaches to this task:

Flip chart outline

The leader puts the key headings on a flip chart. For instance, with the story of Jesus' baptism these might be:

- John the Baptist is at work: where? Doing what?

- Jesus arrives: what happens?
- Afterwards: how does it end?

This can lead to a rich engagement with the remembered text, as the following version, written by an eight-year-old girl at a remembered Bible study, indicates:

> *When Jesus was baptised it was a sunny day. There were a lot of people and his mum and dad came late. Jesus was already there because he had camped there. The man that baptised him was John. I bet it was exciting and Jesus probably told one of his stories.* (Lees 2007:23)

Finishing off the sentence

This approach has a version of the story written on flash cards. The sentences are presented in order and the group complete each one. For instance, the wedding at Cana might be like this:

- Jesus went to a wedding and…
- His mother said to him…
- He replied to her…
- The he…
- Afterwards the head of the household said…

Animated method

Use toys or puppets to represent the characters in the story and invite some members of the group to move them around under direction by other members. In small groups, each group might think about the activities of a different character.

Charades

The leader acts out the story, line by line (or incident by incident) and the group have to guess what happened. Usually chaotic and great fun.

Lees offers many more creative approaches, all of which can help people to remember and engage with the text of the Bible in ways which bring it to life. What she also discovered is that people bring their own experiences into the retelling so that the living message of the Bible is renewed and refreshed in their daily life.

Sensing scripture

Luther suggested that the ear is the only organ for the Christian. This might have been true in the modernist era but it is not true for 21st century Western culture. Postmodern Bible study will invite people to use all of their senses as a way of deepening their encounter with God's word. A number of groups are already experimenting with these approaches.

Contxt describes itself as "a new gathering in the Seattle area to explore spiritual formation through ancient, modern, and postmodern approaches to the ancient texts of scripture." The members of Contxt use a variety of playful approaches to exploring scripture. This is what one of their members has to say, both about the approach and the difficulties of adopting it:

> *We are trying to explore scripture in new ways at Contxt, trying to break out of the molds that may be keeping us from seeing what we need to see as we examine the story and unfolding revelation of God. We try to come up with a new (and often seemingly bizarre) activity to give us a new perspective on the text or story we are*

considering. This has had the effect of making it very difficult to set aside adequate planning time, and we are looking for a more sustainable and transferable approach.

One way to increase the sustainability of Contxt and decrease the necessary planning time is to develop a repertoire of practices that we can employ with almost any text. For example, lectio divina *has been used for centuries to enter the scriptures in a deeply meaningful way. By blending this and other ancient practices with modern, postmodern, and experimental practices we develop ourselves, we hope to find ways forward in the engagement of scripture and life.*

At the same time, we want to continue the experimental flavor of Contxt, so we will continue to devote a portion of our planning time to developing new ways of approaching the biblical texts.

Below we look at a number of ways of engaging with the Bible. Some of them come from Contxt, others are suggestions to be tried out.

Touch scripture

One way to engage differently with the Bible is through physical play. This could be done in a number of different ways:

- Invite people to make a paper models which symbolise something essential about the different characters in the reading.
- Use Playdough to sculpt the essence of the message as you understand it.
- Draw or paint your response to the passage you have just heard.
- Make a collage by cutting and sticking pictures and words from magazines, using bits of wool, pipe cleaners, scraps of material and so on.

Rewrite scripture

- Rewrite the passage how you'd like it to have been.
- Write what is not there, the unwritten background or the bits that the writers left out. (The apocryphal gospels did this, as well as writing what they would have liked to have been there.)
- Use the 'left hand column' exercise (Ross & Kleiner 1994:246). Draw a line down the middle of a sheet of paper. On the right hand side write down the dialogue, or the words of the narrator or author. On the left hand side write down what they were thinking as they spoke or wrote. If there a number of characters, a few people could work on each character and then see how their left hand columns work out together. If just one authorial voice as in a prophecy or epistle, do it as a group exercise.

Enact scripture

- Use role play or 'improv' techniques to act out the passage you are studying. In some ways this might work better with a non-narrative passage—you have to improvise a scene which exemplifies the message of the passage.
- Use Godly Play to enter into the story and reflect on it. Godly Play was designed for children and has a regular structure which is based on patterns of worship:

  Entering the playroom is the first threshold, marked by a personal greeting at the door. Preparation both individually and collectively occurs as the children gather in

a circle around the storyteller, sharing news and settling down in expectation of the day's presentation.

Next, God's word in the form of a story is presented as something to which a special kind of attention is paid by both adults and children alike—a mysterious gift rather than as narrative entertainment or platform for a teaching point. [The story is 'enacted' using models often within a prepared space, such as a sand tray to represent desert.]

Time follows for 'collective response' as the group of children and adult(s) wonder together about the many meanings and resonances for them in the presentation.

Then time is allowed for individual response and further discovery of meaning as the children each choose for themselves ways to work/play using a wide variety of art and craft materials, or the story materials themselves 'in their own way'.

Typically this personal time ends with re-forming as a group, as a community, and a 'feast' (of juice and biscuits) is shared together to mark this period. The session ends with a word and or gesture of personal blessing for each child as they both leave behind and take with them something of their experiences.

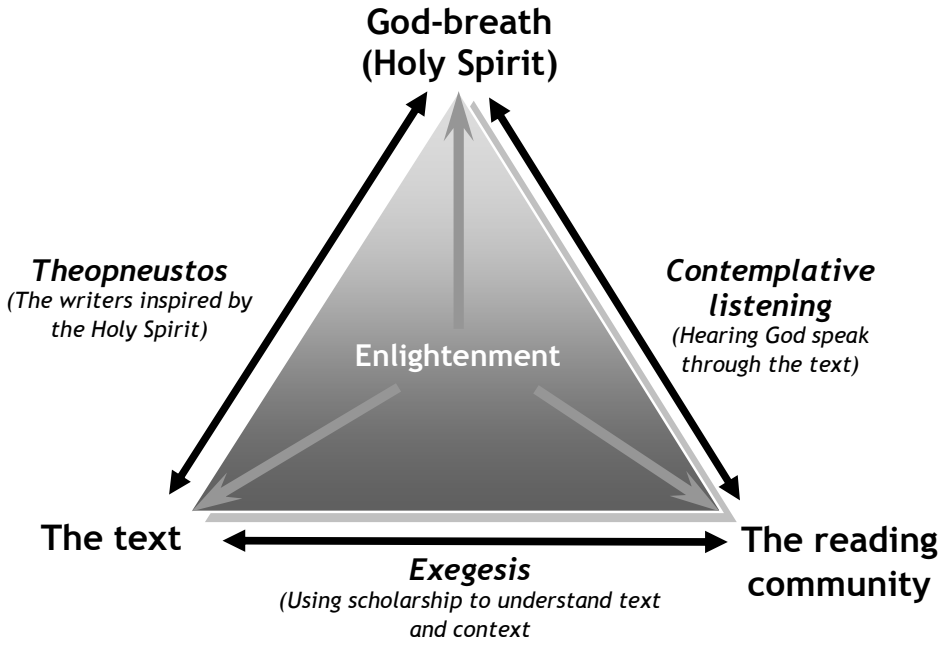
Use provocative video

YouTube is a great resource. There are lots of provocative videos which can be used to start a fresh exploration of the Bible. For instance, a search for 'Job Bible' and you'll find a number of videos which offer an often sceptical perspective. A book like Job raises many difficult questions. Using video can help people who are not very literate or who find written text hard to engage with.

Co-creative meaning making

Underpinning all these approaches to reading scripture is some sort of belief that meaning is socially constructed. In the case of the Bible it implies an approach to *theopneustos* ("God-breathed"—2Ti 3:16) which is relational and continuing. It is not that Scripture was God-breathed only when it was written or edited but that it still is a vehicle for God's breathy inspiration for us today.

On this view there are three elements: the text, the reading community, and the Holy Spirit of God himself:



Session Five Notes—A Kaleidoscope of Meaning

Sola Scriptura

Kevin Vanhoozer argues that the emergence of postmodernity offers the possibility of reinstating the doctrine of *sola scriptura*. It questions whether any single human point of view can capture universal truth.

> *Scripture is a polyphonic testimony to what God has done, is doing, and will do in Christ for the salvation of the world. No other story, no work of genius, communicates that. Sola scriptura means that this testimony is not only irreducible, but that Scripture should enjoy epistemic and existential primacy in the life of the church.* (2003:167)

Taking the mini-narrative seriously

The Jesus Seminar was founded by the late Robert Funk and John Dominic Crossan in 1985. At its inauguration Robert Funk said,

> *We are about to embark on a momentous enterprise. We are going to inquire simply, rigorously after the voice of Jesus, after what he really said.*
>
> *In this process, we will be asking a question that borders the sacred, that even abuts blasphemy, for many in our society. As a consequence, the course we shall follow may prove hazardous. We may well provoke hostility. But we will set out, in spite of the dangers, because we are professionals and because the issue of Jesus is there to be faced, much as Mt. Everest confronts the team of climbers.*

It has more than two hundred professionally trained Fellows and meets twice a year to debate technical papers that have been prepared and circulated in advance. At the close of debate on each agenda item, Fellows of the Seminar vote, using coloured beads to indicate the degree of authenticity of Jesus' words or deeds.

See http://www.westarinstitute.org/Jesus_Seminar/jesus_seminar.html for more information.

The Levite's Concubine Bible study outline

Introduction

After opening prayer, we read the passage together, noting perhaps some of the different translations available.

The leader then outlines the context of the passage. Something like this:

- Exodus—disobedience—law—disobedience—promised land—disobedience—wandering—promised land—disobedience—judges—disobedience—etc.

The aftermath of this incident also needs to be briefly outlined:

- War with Benjamin—failure—war—failure—repentance—success—marriage by capture.

Finally the Deuteronomist's homily:

- In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes. (Jud 21:25)

Group work

The group splits into four smaller groups (I'm thinking of a group which has between 12–16 members). Each uses a filter to examine the passage: sex and gender relationships, retribution, power and hospitality. The group leader will give notes to each group to help them in their task.

Plenary

Each group will report briefly on what it has seen in the passage. General discussion will ensue.

The leader will then invite people to offer modern parallels with what they have read, either from their own lives or from what they have heard or read.

Where is God?

The groups reconvene to read the passage again, this time using God as a filter. "Where is God in this passage?" "What would God say/do if he were watching?"

Pulling it together

Coming back into plenary, the group reflects on God's role and purpose in events like the Levite's concubine as well as the modern parallels identified. This will lead naturally into intercessory prayer, which will end the study.

Lectio divina

The text of Guigo's *The Ladder of Four Rungs* can be found at:

http://www.umilta.net/ladder.html

If the classical approach is used in a group, there is often a fifth 'rung', action (*operatio*) in which people share their experience with others.

Ignatian approaches

A translation of the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius Loyola (1491-1556) can be found at http://www.ccel.org/ccel/ignatius/exercises.titlepage.html

Playing scripture

The quote from Justin of Contxt can be found at http://www.contxt.us/page/2/

Godly Play

The quote about Godly Play comes from their website:

http://www.godlyplay.org.uk/whatisgodlyplay.html

Provocative video

My emerging-church (www.emerging-church.org) website has a number of examples of videos which could be used to kick off a Bible study.

Further reading

Jim Currin, *Paradox in the Gospel?*—argues that although there is a lot of paradox in the gospels and in Jesus' proclamation we tend to ignore it or downplay it. This can lead to an assumption of certainty which is offputting to those who come into contact with Christians.

An honest exploration of the paradoxes and uncertainties of Scripture may be more appropriate to today's seekers, as well as being truer to the Bible itself.

Doug Ingram, *Ecclesiastes: A Peculiarly Postmodern Piece*—looks at Ecclesiastes and argues that it has very strong resonances with a postmodern consciousness.

Session Six—Perspectives on Preaching

Can preaching survive in a postmodern era? A quick answer might be, 'no'—after all, some of the key characteristics of preaching seem fundamentally opposed to postmodern sensibilities. Three aspects of modern preaching spring to mind:

- *Preaching is authoritative*—one person has 'the truth' which they attempt to communicate to others.
- *Preaching is not participative*—one person stands and expounds while many others sit and passively listen.
- *Preaching is cerebral*—one person shares the results of their research and study; the focus is on the 'meaning' of the text.

Admittedly, the above is more of a parody than a summary of modern preaching but it has some grain of truth in it—and it does highlight some of the challenges for preachers today. And these challenges are going to get more potent. Not only do we find ourselves in situations where the unchurched are expected to 'endure' a sermon (weddings and baptisms are the obvious occasions) but as more and more churchgoers are assimilated into postmodern culture we will need new ways to engage with them.

So what principles could we use to guide us through this new territory? Is there a postmodern equivalent of the three-point sermon? Well, there could not be any universal formula, of course—that would be against the sensibilities of the age. But there are some guiding principles which might see us through. In this session we are going to focus on three key themes: story, testimony and performance. None is strongly emphasised in most traditional modernist preaching (though all are present) but they will pervade the whole of this session.

Preaching as story

As a culture we are rediscovering the importance of story and storytelling. Story is democratic: it invites the listener to participate in the process of discovery; story draws the listener in and encourages deeper reflection; story engages both head and heart; story provokes more story as we find ourselves retelling the story we have just heard with ourselves as key characters. After all, storytelling is what Jesus mostly did.

Narrative preaching opens up the possibility of connecting with people at a deep level. There are a number of ways in which we might include narrative perspectives in our preaching:

- Use illustrations.
- Make the structure of your sermon mirror the structure of a typical story.
- Write a story which illustrates the point of the sermon.
- Tell the story from the perspective of a character within the text.

Use illustrations

The easiest way to harness the power of story, even in the context of a traditional sermon, is to use illustrations. Any preacher knows that it is usually the illustrations which people remember:

> *A preacher dies and is waiting in line at the Pearly Gates. Ahead of him is a London cabbie who's dressed in sunglasses, a loud shirt, leather jacket and jeans.*

Saint Peter consults his list. He smiles and says to the taxi-driver, "Take this silken robe and golden staff and enter the Kingdom of Heaven."

Saint Peter then turns to the preacher. "Take this cotton robe and wooden staff and enter the Kingdom of Heaven."

"Just a minute," says the preacher. "How come a taxi-driver gets a silken robe and golden staff and I don't?"

"Up here, we work by results," says Saint Peter. "While you preached, people slept; while he drove, people prayed."

There are lots of online illustration resources, some of which are given in the notes. It is rarely a good idea to use an illustration just as you find it. Take the trouble to alter it so that it fits your style and is appropriate to the congregation.

Use story structure

A lot of work has been done on the structure of the story, starting perhaps with Aristotle and his work *De Poetica*. One way very simple way of looking at the basic story structure is to see it in four parts:

- A protagonist
- A goal
- An obstacle
- A resolution

*John [*protagonist*] was thirsty [*goal*]. He looked around but could see nothing to drink [*obstacle*]. So he went to the kitchen and got some orange juice from the fridge [*resolution*].*

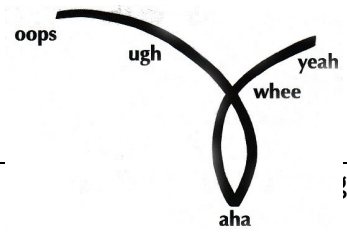
The above example illustrates the fact that structure alone doesn't make a good story. We don't care about John; it isn't much of a goal or an obstacle and the resolution is predictable and boring. However, the same basic structure could lead to a very different response if we learn that John is only 10, has been abducted and then abandoned in an old warehouse and hasn't had a drink for over 12 hours. Now we start to care about the character, empathise with his situation and long for some resolution. If the detail is further developed in a compelling way we have the makings of a good short story or script.

Narrative preaching

Traditional preaching offers the results of the preacher's study and prayer around a given passage or topic. By contrast, narrative preaching aims to take the listeners on a voyage of exploration so that they can discover the richness of the gospel themselves. The classical structure for this is the three-point sermon. By contrast, narrative preaching aims to make the structure of the sermon the same as the structure of the basic story. The three-point sermon advocates, the narrative sermon inquires. The three-point sermon is best for those who seek certainties; the narrative sermon speaks to those on a spiritual journey.

One approach to structuring the sermon in a narrative way is that expounded by Eugene Lowry, a professor of homiletics and a jazz pianist. He has taken the simple pattern a little further and argues that the narrative sermon should have a five-part structure (2001). The five parts of Lowry's structure are:

- Oops!—upsetting the equilibrium;
- Ugh!—analysing the discrepancy;



- Aha!—disclosing the clue to resolution;
- Whee!—experiencing the gospel;
- Yeah!—anticipating the consequences.

Oops!

The first step is to upset the equilibrium of the congregation. They will come with a variety of experiences, expectations and moods. The first task of the preacher is to engage them and offer something which enables them to engage with the sermon. Lowry suggests that *ambiguity* is a good starting place, and that one of the best ways to create a sense of ambiguity is to introduce people, especially people with a problem. (If we publish a sermon title beforehand, says Lowry, it should help introduce this sense of ambiguity rather than resolution; "How can we choose the lesser evil?" is a better title than "Jesus is the answer".)

For instance when I preached about the resurrection, I started by asking what really happened. There are a number of possibilities, I said, the first one of which is that it happened exactly as the Bible tells us. I then said that this is the least likely of all the options. Needless to say, this had the congregation suddenly listening hard, if only to see if I would preach heresy openly in their midst.

Many preachers give away the ending right at the beginning; they may even have been taught to offer a brief summary of the sermon so that people have a 'signpost' or won't get lost. It is indeed important to offer some sense of direction, but not by giving away the plot. Doing so loses any sense of tension and means that people are less likely to want to travel with you on your journey through the sermon.

Ugh!

Having presented the ambiguity, the next stage is to ask why. Why are things as you have just presented them: paradoxical, uncomfortable, inexplicable, morally confusing, or whatever? This will often be the main part of the exposition and needs careful thought and preparation.

The basic position of every preacher, says Lowry (2001:40), is that there is a *gap*, a discrepancy between what is and what ought to be. In this stage of the narrative sermon, the question of the gap is explored, while still trying to keep the suspense. Don't reveal the reason for the gap you're exploring too soon. What most preachers fail to master is depth of analysis; too many preachers offer description instead of diagnosis. Yet it is deep diagnosis which is necessary for the narrative to continue to engage the listener.

So, to continue the resurrection example, I then looked at all the other different possibilities including that Jesus wasn't really dead and that he recovered; that the Romans were bribed to give him a drug; that someone intervened to take him down before he died; that he did die on the cross and that the body was stolen; the disciples saw a ghost and interpreted that as Jesus being physically present with them; that his disciples were so aware of his ongoing presence that they started to think of him as being still with them.

Aha!

When the issue has been properly analysed, then it is time to disclose the clue to resolution. This is characterised by the *principle of reversal*. Lowry quotes Foster Harris who says:

> *…the answer to any possible problem or question you could pose is always in some fantastic manner the diametric reversal of the question.* (1959:6)

The principle of reversal is at the heart of all humour—the basic joke pattern sets up an expectation, then pulls the rug away by reversing it, evoking laughter as the cathartic response to the suddenly experienced alternative way of perceiving.

Jesus was particularly adept at the reversal: a good man and a bad man pray; the good man acknowledges that he is good, the bad man acknowledges that he is bad; yet Jesus says that the bad man has done good *and* the good man has done bad.

In the resurrection sermon I asked if we could tell which of these options was the most likely. I then suggested that the Biblical options was the most likely *because it was the least likely!* (This is Tom Wright's argument that the Biblical account is so out of keeping with contemporary Jewish expectations that no-one would have made it up and no-one would have believed it even if they had.)

Whee!

It is at this point that the hearers are ready to receive the gospel remedy to the dilemma posed and exposed in the first three stages. Lowry sees the gospel as, "continuous with human experience *after* human experience has been turned upside down." (2001:79) If the ground has been properly prepared this stage will flow easily and effectively, both for preacher in preparation and congregation in reception.

The preacher can now challenge the listeners to respond, leave them with food for further thought, lead them into worship, or whatever future-facing response is appropriate. If they have stayed with you throughout your narrative journey (and they are more likely to than if you had preached a traditional expository sermon) they will be ready to journey forward.

In the sermon we now move forward into a deeper certainty about the miracle of Jesus' resurrection, it's amazing novelty and the hope it offers for our own resurrection.

Yeah!

The gospel has been preached and the congregation have received it. The final task of the preacher is to point to the future. As Paul said, "What then are we to say about these things?" (Roman 8:31). Whether this part be a detailed examination of the practical consequences of the gospel or a brief pointer to future action it is important to end in this way.

Write your own story

Sometimes you don't have an appropriate story to hand. If so, why not write your own? In the sermon below I wanted to end with a story that would make an impact on my listeners. Nothing I came across seemed to fit. Then I remembered a story I had read many years ago in one of Paul White's *Jungle Doctor* books about a monkey stuck in a bog (1958). I rewrote it and used it to end my sermon. The feedback I received was that it had made a great impression. (It also fits quite neatly into Lowry's *Homiletical Plot* model and so I have indicated where the five stages occur.)

"Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash."

- *That's a nice little story isn't it? The sensible man, who built his house on the rock and the silly man who built his on the sand.*

- *There's a little song, isn't there? (Sings)*
  The wise man built his house upon a rock
  The wise man built his house upon a rock
  The wise man built his house upon a rock
  And the rains came tumbling down
- *But let's look more closely. We'll find that things are not quite so nice.* [**Oops!**]
- *The wise man is the one who 'hears these words of mine and puts them into practice', the foolish man is the one who does not.*
- *But what are 'these words of mine'?*
- *Well, this story occurs at the end of a long piece of teaching from Jesus which we call the Sermon on the Mount.*
- *So we must hear and put into practice the sermon on the mount. And what does that say?*
- *Among other things it says,* [**Ugh!**]
  - *If you are angry with brother or sister you're liable to judgement*
  - *If you say, 'you fool' you'll be liable to the hell of fire*
  - *If you look at someone else & think I'd like to sleep with them, then you've committed adultery*
  - *Swear no oath*
  - *Do not resist an evil doer*
  - *Turn the other cheek*
  - *Love your enemies*
  - *Do good to those who hate you*
  - *Give to everyone who begs from you*
  - *Do not worry about food or clothing*
  - *Do not judge others*
- *Whew! Can you honestly say you've heard and done all these?*
- *If you can, please stand up.*
- *What? No-one?*
- *Just me, then! (Sink to knees).*
- *This means, then, that we are all like the foolish man. When the storm comes—and it will—we will get washed away.*
- *This seems to be a gospel of despair, not hope. But there is more…* [**Aha!**]
- *I'm reminded of time when a rich young man came to Jesus…*
- *Disciples ask, "who then can be saved?"*
- *"What is impossible for men is possible for God"*
- *Paul knew this. All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God*
- *That is what sin is—whenever we fall short of the glory of God; whenever we fall short of the kingdom behaviour and attitudes outlined by Jesus in the sermon on the mount.*
- *So what can we do about it? Nothing.*
- *What will God do about it? Everything.*
- *Faith, Paul tells us, is the answer. If we reach out to God in faith he will save us. That is why Jesus came: that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.* [**Whee!**]

  There was once a man who went walking by himself when he fell into some quicksand. He didn't really notice at first; just thought the ground was a bit soggy. And then, as he sank down a bit more he said to himself,' this is fun.'

  As the quicksand covered his thighs and waist he became aware of a sense of weightlessness. 'This is really quite relaxing', he thought, 'I needed a rest anyway.' And he took out his sandwiches and began to eat them. Just then a woman came along and spotted him. 'Quick', she said, 'grab my hand and I'll pull you out.' No thank you' he said rather snottily, 'I'm fine. When I need to get out I'll be able to manage by myself.'

But as the sand came up to his chest and towards his neck he began to realise that he was in a bit of a difficult situation. Again the woman offered her hand. Again he refused. 'I'm perfectly capable of getting out of this' he thought 'and anyway, I'm not going to lose face by being rescued by a woman!'

So he started to struggle towards the solid ground. But this only seemed to make him sink faster. The woman's hand was still outstretched and still he ignored her. Finally, in desperation, he grabbed at his own ears and tried to pull himself out. But to no avail. The last thing he saw, as he sank under the sand, was the woman's outstretched hand.

- *We cannot build our house on solid rock by our own efforts. We will only do it if will reach up and take Jesus' outstretched hand.* [**Yeah!**]
- *Have you? Will you?*

(*Preached 28th May 2005 at St Andrew's, Bacton*)

Preaching as a character in the story

A really effective way of re-telling a well-known story is to tell it from the perspective of one of the characters. Indeed, it can often be effective to have a character who does not appear as the narrator. One suggestion was to tell the story of Eli and Samuel from the standpoint of Eli's cat!

This not, perhaps, an approach to use all the time but whenever I have done it the response has been very positive. "The best sermon you've ever preached" was the verdict of one parishioner after I adopted the persona of Bartholomew to recall the story of Peter's confession:

- *You wanted to know about the church?*
- *I was there when it was founded, you know*
- *I'd been with the Master from the beginning*
- *I remember when he called out the twelve*
- *I was gobsmacked when he called out my name, Bartholomew.*
- *Little did any of us know what kind of journey he would take us on*
- *Anyway, one day, towards the end, we were up in the northeast, in the Golan Heights*
- *We were going from village to village as usual, telling people the good news that God's kingdom is near and that there is a new way to live your life*
- *We'd got to Caesarea Philippi—do you know it?*
- *It's at the top of a sheer rock face, 100 feet high. At the bottom is a cave with a spring where the pagans have put a shrine to Pan.*
- *A stream gushes out from the rock and we all stopped for a drink and a rest.*
- *Jesus asks us, "Who do people say I am?"*
- *Well, they said all sorts of things, from demon possessed to one of the prophets returned.*
- *So we told him this (except the demon bit but of course he knew that).*
- *Then he goes, "Who do you say I am?"*
- *A huge silence you could cut with a knife.*
- *Of course we all knew in our hearts but how to say it out loud?*
- *Then Simon—of course—blurts it out: "You're God's anointed, his messiah, his Christ. You're the son of the living God"*
- *Well, when he'd said it we all knew. It was out in the open. And nothing was ever the same from that moment on.*
- *And then he made one of his jokes (he was always joking; such fun to be with).*
- *Simon, he said, your nickname is Peter the rock and on this rock (not the one in front of us) I will build my community, my church.*

- *I have to say that none of us paid much attention to that; there was just too much going on. It was only later that we remembered it.*
- *You know the rest of course: the journey to Jerusalem; that terrible day when they… and we all ran away and left him.*
- *And the despair, and the feeling of failure and the conviction that they'd come for us next…*
- *And then that wonderful day when we saw him again. So radiant, so full of love and forgiveness as usual. You've got to experience him for yourself to understand…*
- *And so the end became the beginning. And that's when we started to understand the church.*
- *At its best—when it is a community where the only law is love, where there is no judgement, when forgiveness happens over and over again, when everyone supports everyone else and where Jesus is the head and the heart—then it is better than anything I've ever known; just like being with him.*
- *Of course, it doesn't always work like that. We all too easily forget him and forget what we're called to.*
- *After all, none of us are perfect; but as I always say, he didn't call us to like each other but to love each other.*
- *What we have to remember is what brother Paul taught us—and he wasn't always so easy to like—that it's like we're all one body. As long as we work and live together, with Jesus at the centre, we'll be fine.*
- *Anyway, all this talking's got me tired. I need to sit down. My journey here has nearly ended; but the story goes on, you know.*
- *I have a vision of the church of the church stretching thousands of years into the future and reaching into every part of the earth. All it needs is for people to catch the vision.*
- *I did, you know. Will you?*
- *Well, God bless you. Thank you for listening.*

(*Preached 30th September 2007 at All Saints, Chedgrave*)

Preaching as experiential storytelling

Mark Miller (2003) suggests that we take preaching as storytelling to the next stage. He advocates creating events in which people can experience the power of the story themselves through participating in a dramatic re-enactment of the gospel story. By use of installations, labyrinths and other multimedia enactments the postmodern consciousness can be immersed in a new kind of preaching.

Miller's ideas are not always clearly expressed and there is clearly a lot of cross-over with some forms of alternative worship but his emphasis on a combination of experience and participatory storytelling resonates with the experience of many emerging churches where creativity is a key value. (For an example of the sort of thing Miller is writing about, see the notes).

This approach is also closely related to scripture-based liturgy, which we will look at in the next session.

Preaching as testimony

In a modernist context there is a strong case to be made for distinguishing preaching and testimony. Preaching is authoritative, based on study and reason; testimony is personal and subjective. Anyone can give a testimony but only the learned and gifted can preach. Today such distinctions seem less solid than they once did. In particular, contemporary culture is suspicious of learned authority and much readier to take notice of personal experience because it is more likely to demonstrate that key quality of *authenticity*. This suggests that those preachers who use a lot of testimony in their preaching are likely to be more effective.

One way to do this is to use personal illustrations. As you study the text and reflect on it, does it resonate with your own life experience? Is there a specific incident in your life story which you could use to show how God works, or demonstrate our need for God's working? Some preachers are very adept at finding personal illustrations and drawing the congregation into the text. Others are less successful, merely drawing the congregation into themselves. The purpose of the personal illustration must always be the glorification of God not the preacher.

But personal illustrations do not necessarily amount to testimony. There needs to be a sharing at a personal level and this can bring its own difficulties. If the testimony is personal, on whose authority can it be offered? Suppose it seems to contradict the commentaries; suppose it sounds illogical; suppose no-one will believe me; suppose I can't prove it—testimony is fraught with danger.

Anna Carter Florence argues that testimony preaching has long been a part of church history but that it has largely been hidden because it has been the province of women. She offers a number of reasons for adopting testimony-based preaching (2007:xxvi):

- It brings into focus a vast repertoire of women's sermons.
- It changes the subject of preaching to include those who have preached and testified from the margins.
- It shifts the locus of authority away from the office of the preacher and places it with the one who testifies.
- Preaching moves from the ecclesiastical centre to the personal faith struggles of the person who risks disclosing themselves in specific embodied situations.
- Testimony-based preaching offers another view of the role of experience. The preacher is called to engage with the gospel and then to narrate and confess what she has discovered and believed.
- It offers another view of what it means to be a preacher.
- It calls the preacher to live in and live out the Word of God.

Testimony preaching is not about the preacher; it is much more than simply talking about your own life and experiences. It is all about God's word; it is about what happened to you when you encountered this text at this time—what did you *really* see or experience, rather than what your training or the commentaries or your concept of orthodoxy tells you that you *ought* to have seen or experienced.

This is dangerous stuff; is the congregation ready for it, could they cope? And the answer may be that they can't, if they are a very traditional congregation still steeped in 'vicar knows best' ways of thought and action. But even so, congregations are often a lot more resilient than people give them credit for. To hear their own difficulties honestly expressed from the front may unlock some of their resistance to moving forward in discipleship. In testimony preaching there is a three-fold move: from *attending* through *describing* to *testifying* (Florence 2007: 139ff).

Attending

The first step is to attend to the text, to live in it. To this end Florence offers a number of exercises for attending to the text, suggesting that the use of two or three can help develop deep attention to the text. The exercises include:

- *Write it*—handwrite the passage in a large unlined notebook.

- *Pocket it*—write it out again on a small piece of paper and put it in your pocket or handbag.
- *Memorise it*—read it over and over again, read it at odd moments when you have a break, go for a walk, get stuck in a traffic jam, etc. keep it with you at all times.
- *Underline it*—read the text you've written in your notebook and underline whatever stands out for you. Don't think too hard about this. Now take the underlined words and phrases and write them out again. Pray and ponder. Ask questions of them; what do they say to you? Where are they leading you?
- *Subtext it*—what is the subtext here? (See the 'Left Hand Column' exercise in the Bible Study section). This can be good to do with a group.
- *Block it*—look at the physical movement stated or implied by the text.
- *Create it*—draw, paint or sculpt the text.

Describing

The next step is describing. The question which describing tries to answer is, "what do you believe about what you have seen?" Again, Forster offers a number of exercises, including:

- *Image it*—make a list of the images that appear in the text (light, salt, blood, etc.). take one, close your eyes and say it aloud. Let yourself 'see' whatever words or pictures are evoked. Then write rapidly and without editing whatever came to you. Now reflect on what you have written.
- *Rewrite it*—rewrite the text in your own words. Try doing this from memory. Then look at what you have included, what you have left out and what you have changed or added. What do these tell you about the text and your own responses to it?
- *Character-sketch it*—write a description of someone in the text, either a character or the narrator. What do they look like, how do they talk, what are their interests, what are their prejudices, etc.
- *Letter it*—write a series of short letters on the text, perhaps from one character to another or perhaps from you to the narrator or principal character.
- *Change it*—rewrite the text as you would like it to be. What does this tell you about you and the text?

Testifying

Finally, what are you going to say? How much of your wrestling and questioning dare you share with the congregation? This is the nub of the testimony approach. You could use the preparation as the basis for a conventional dispassionate disengaged sermon. Or you could take the risk of exposing yourself with all the possibility of displaying error, incompetence and weakness. But if you will take the risk there is always the possibility that your listeners will hear an engagement with the Word which strikes them as real and authentic, and which will move their hearts and minds.

Testimony preaching, according Florence, is not about us. It is not about what happened when we encountered the text. It's about what we saw and heard *in* the text.

Preaching as power play

Testimony preaching raises some interesting issues about the nature of the preacher. After all, anybody can give testimony, can't they? So does this mean that anybody preach? Different congregations will answer this in different ways. Not everyone is spiritually mature

enough to be able to reflect on their own encounter with the Word; not everyone is able to offer the fruits of their encounter in ways which will edify others. The nature of the public arena, especially in larger congregations, will disqualify many who might offer fruitful testimony in a small group. Nevertheless, there are some serious issues about power and authority which are being raised today.

For instance, does preaching perpetuate a hierarchical model of Christianity which is incompatible with Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom? For many unchurched people (and quite a few in the church), the pulpit can be seen as symbolising a distance between preacher and listener which is unhelpful and undesirable. It encourages their natural scepticism about the integrity of authority figures and makes it harder for them to listen with an open mind and heart.

After all, Jesus *sat* to preach (Luke 4:20). Today, nearly every preacher stands, and many use a pulpit—*six feet above contradiction*, as the saying goes. Some see the very nature of the relationship between preacher and congregation as one of power and powerlessness: the all-knowing professional drops pearls of wisdom before the ignorant congregation.

Interestingly, Jana Childers (1998:45) argues otherwise. She claims that *distance* plays a vital role in any attempt to view the sermon as drama. Without distance there is no space for the drama to unfold. Childers also stresses the importance of the eye in appreciating the performance of the sermon; pulpits usually offer better sight lines so that the preacher can be better seen than if he or she is at the same level as the congregation.

And as long as most congregations sit in rows as passive consumers, it is difficult for the preacher to sit, as Jesus did. For while it might be possible to sit in a circle and share stories of Jesus in a small congregation, it will never be an option when the congregation gets above thirty or so. There are also two things to remember about Jesus' ministry. Firstly, he must often have sat above his listeners so that they could see and hear him. Secondly, sitting was a posture associated with teaching in first-century Palestine. It did not symbolise egalitarian participation but authority and wisdom (Mt 23:2).

Collaborative preaching

Nevertheless the arguments continue. Doug Pagitt, pastor of Solomon's Porch an emerging church in Minneapolis and one of the leaders of the emerging church in the USA, is very critical of traditional preaching:

> *For Pagitt, it is unhealthy--even abusive--to suggest that only a few, privileged individuals can speak for God. "Why do I get to speak for 30 minutes and you don't?" "A sermon is often a violent act," says Pagitt, a key figure among emerging leaders. "It's a violence toward the will of the people who have to sit there and take it."*
>
> *To treat the sermon as an oratorical performance delivered by a paid and trained professional who claims to speak for God sets up an artificial power imbalance within the congregation, says Pagitt, a Baptist by training. It's hard for a congregation to practice the priesthood of all believers when the preaching perpetuates an image of the pastor as somehow more authoritative or spiritual than his or her listeners.* (Allen 2006)

At Solomon's Porch, Tuesday night is Bible discussion group. Anyone who wishes turns up to study the passage of scripture to be preached next Sunday:

> *…this group is like a microcosm of our community, standing in for others as we enter into the [Bible] passage. In many ways this group sets the form and feel and*

> *content for what will happen on Sunday night during our worship gathering. Together we explore the questions and issues so that when the same passage is presented to the larger group, it will be clear that it has been wrestled with not just by the theologian (me) but by "regular" people as well.* (Pagitt 2003:87)

This evening is Pagitt's primary preparation for the Sunday sermon. As part of the sermon time each Sunday they open up for comment, reflections, views and dissent. Pagitt likes to view this as an integral part of the sermon:

> *I think of the sermon itself as a discussion involving our community, the Bible, those who have come before us, and those around the world who seek the same goal of living lives faithful to the way of Jesus. Our sermons are not primarily about extracting truth from the Bible and applying those realities to people's lives. Rather, we are trying to allow the world we live in and the faith we hold to interact, to dance, to inform each other. We can't do that if I'm the only one who gets to talk.* (2003:94)

Preaching as performance

The third of the great themes in this session is *performance*. St Augustine notes that Cicero, the great writer on rhetoric, says that, "an eloquent man must speak so as to teach, to delight, and to persuade." The first of these is about what we say; the second two about how we say it. Augustine agrees with Cicero with respect to oratory but feels that some change is necessary for preaching: the order should be to teach, to give pleasure, and to move. (*On Christian Doctrine* IV:12ff).

Some while ago, before I came across Augustine's views, I reflected on my own preaching. I came to realise that my aims were to move, to entertain, and to teach. I had included the same elements as Augustine but my order was different. For him, teaching was primary; for me it came third. For me, teaching seems to be most effectively done in a group context. The purpose of the sermon is to inspire, provoke or stir up. Someone said recently that it isn't important whether people remember your sermon; what matters is that they might be changed by it.

If this is true—and I think it is, at least for those today who are no longer persuaded by rational argument—then we may need to re-think our approach to preaching. Jana Childers (1998:34) writes about the 'lively sermon' which opens, draws and holds people, creating a moment for God to move in. This is preaching as performance; emotion coming before reason. As the theatre critic Arthur Hopkins wrote, "In the theatre, I do not want the emotion that rises out of thought, but thought that arises out of emotion." (cited in Childers 1998:39). In preaching today, we want the same.

Because of this, preaching now becomes a much more physical, embodied, activity. Gesture and posture become as important as inflection and tone of voice. In performance there is a direct link between actor and audience, leading to a rapport and suspension of disbelief—very important for those who reject authority and tend to see conspiracies in the world's mysteries.

Notes or no notes?

If the sermon is to move people and change their hearts and minds, there must be a connection between preacher and congregation. The text of the sermon is important but it must never come between speaker and listener. Most preachers read their sermons from a written text yet an actor always learns the lines or else, as in a Mike Leigh play, improvises them after an extensive rehearsal period.

Does this mean that the performed sermon should never be preached from notes or full text? I hesitate to be dogmatic, but to preach without notes offers some freedoms. There is no need to have a lectern or pulpit between preacher and congregation. There is the possibility that the Holy Spirit may intervene and lead you in paths which you had not thought of in preparation (see below on 'preaching as jazz'). It also enables you to use your body more freely since there is nothing to hold and nothing to consult.

Despite the manifest advantages, most preachers consider it folly to preach without notes. They don't want to use their bodies freely; the idea of 'connecting' with the congregation is scary. Instead the lectern or pulpit is seen as something to hide behind. It is true that many preachers—especially white middle class Anglo-Saxon male preachers—find it very hard to be comfortable in their own bodies. Gesture during a sermon can be very effective but it does have to be of an appropriate size: too small and it is either lost or simply looks feeble and detracts from the message; too big and it looks silly or as if the preacher is drawing attention to himself.

The answer is training (how about your local dramatic society?); practice (an empty church can be useful for this) and constructive feedback from peers (which isn't always easy to arrange).

But even worse, for most preachers, is the fact that they don't believe that they could memorise what they are going to say. They point to the dangers of getting lost, forgetting the words, wandering around in circles or simply waffling on for long minute after long minute.

It is true that some who preach without notes fall into these traps. But it is not inevitable and in most cases simply betrays a lack of proper preparation. If preaching without notes is to be undertaken it must be preceded by a period of prayer and study until the shape of the sermon is crystal clear. You must be absolutely certain about where you are starting, where you are ending, and the main staging posts on the journey between them. And then, even if most of the sermon is improvised, the congregation will not get lost (and neither will you) but will be carried along the 'arc of the story'.

Beginnings and endings

In performance, beginnings and endings are crucial. 'Grab their attention straight away', and 'always leave them wanting more' are staples of show business and apply just as much to preaching as theatre. For instance my first sermon at Loddon was on Jesus standing before Pilate and Pilate's question, "Are you the king of the Jews" (John 18:33-37).

I waited in silence for a while and then said, "He's having a laugh, isn't he? Pilate—he's having a laugh." The content is not in any way original: it's fairly clear that Pilate was being ironical at best as he looked at the ragged peasant standing before him and asked him if he was a king. But the delivery and language were not what the congregation expected and I had their attention instantly.

This approach can be especially effective with an unchurched congregation, at a baptism, perhaps. I started one baptism sermon with, "There's this woman, right…" Suddenly they were listening.

Endings are equally important. I must admit that I struggle more with finding a good ending. The 'rule of three' can be effective if you want an upbeat inspirational ending. It's a device used often by politicians and consists of a repeated, but varied, phrase at the end of a speech. So, at the end of a sermon on Revelation 21 you might say something like, "We have the promise of a future with no weeping, we have the promise of a future with no pain,

we have the promise of a future with no death. Let us praise God and work together with him for the indwelling of his kingdom." If you try this approach you got to deliver it with conviction and courage. If you're half-hearted, it won't ring true.

Using props

It has been said that every preacher is a frustrated actor. Acting is a physical business and actors often use props to emphasise or clarify a point. When we preach to children we, too, often use props, games, jokes, and participation. What we notice is that the adults are often just as engaged as the children. An appropriate use of physical props can help us reach out to 21st century unchurched adults.

Preaching as stand-up

Will unchurched postmodern people sit in rows for long periods of time engaged with a single speaker? Yes, if that speaker is a stand-up comic. What can we as preachers learn from the art of stand-up? The stand-up comedian is a modern storyteller, offering parables from the everyday experience of the audience to offer new perspectives on their lives and beliefs—rather like Jesus, really.

As preachers we may not be able to match the quick-fire delivery and fast thinking required of the successful stand-up but we can learn a lot from their observations of the minutiae of daily life, their attention to detail and their ability to see things differently. We can also look to aim for the degree of rapport established between the successful stand-up and their audience.

There are many different kinds of comedian, including observational comics (such as Jack Dee); topical comics (Rory Bremner); character comics (Steve Coogan); prop comics (Tommy Cooper); physical comics (Lee Evans) impressionists (Ronnie Ancona) and improvisationalists (Paul Merton).

One thing they tend to have in common is that they are often vulnerable, exposing themselves (or their constructed persona) to ridicule yet in the process getting audience sympathy. This has particular resonances with the testimony preacher who also makes herself vulnerable in presenting her own frailties in encountering the text.

Preaching as jazz

The jazz pianist and composer, Cyrus Chestnut said,

> *I always keep myself open to any last-minute inspiration because I thrive in the realm of spontaneity…As long as there is a theme, there can always be variations…whether it's a jazz standard, a pop song or a gospel hymn. I'm like a minister giving his sermon. He will state his theme; he'll improvise variations on that theme; he'll take it to a high point, and then he'll make his closing statement. I'm doing the same thing at the piano.*

Both Kirk Byron Jones and Eugene Lowry have explored links between jazz and preaching—Lowry is a jazz pianist as well as a professor of preaching at Kansas City's St. Paul School of Theology. Lowry says that jazz and preaching have a lot in common.

> *If somebody had said to me early on, 'Gene, try to shape a sermon as you shape a jazz improvisation', I would have picked up upon it and known that what I was doing at the keyboard was narrative.*

Jones (2004) stresses the role of creativity and openness to others in jazz. Unless the jazz musician really listens, it is impossible to play good jazz. Unless the preacher really listens to the Spirit, to the text, to the voices of those who have gone before, she will be unable to approach the sermon in an open and creative way. "If you can't hear it, you can't say it." (2004:53)

For many it is improvisation which characterises jazz. Jones quotes an account of a performance by the jazz trumpeter Winton Marsarlis written by David Hajdu. Marsalis was playing a ballad, *I Don't Stand a Ghost of a Chance with You*, unaccompanied. At the most dramatic point of his conclusion, someone's mobile phone went off. Hajdu writes:

> *Marsalis paused for a beat, motionless, and his eyebrows arched. I scrawled on a sheet of notepaper, MAGIC, RUINED. The cell-phone offender scooted the hall as the chatter in the room grew louder. Still frozen at the microphone, Marsalis replayed the silly cell-phone melody note for note. Then he repeated it, and began improvising variations on the tune. The audience slowly came back to him. In a few minutes he resolved the improvisation—which had changed once or twice and throttled down to a ballad tempo—and ended up exactly where he had left off: "with… you..." The ovation was tremendous.* (Jones 2004:80)

Jones suggests that there are a number of elements in successful improvisation:

- *Playfulness*—the hapless phone user became part of Marsalis' play. By taking the ring tone and transforming it, the performer is showing openness to creativity and an ability to stay 'in the flow'. The 'fixed script' is abandoned for a time as a new creative opportunity is offered. Jones suggests that when Marsalis paused he had not stopped playing. The pause was part of the play, in which he was able to sense the possibilities ahead.
- *Variation*—jazz operates under the presumption that there are always a million and one ways to do things. Some preachers seem to feel that there is only one way to expound a passage and that it is their task to find that right way and to bring it to the congregation. This does not resonate with contemporary culture, nor does it resonate with the multiplicity of approaches found in the different genres in the Bible.
- *Daring*—it takes nerve to do what Marsalis did. It takes nerve to be prepared to abandon the prepared script and launch into the unknown. There is the ever-present possibility of abject failure. But the reward is worth the risk—and if you do crash and burn, will the congregation be the worse for it?
- *Mastery*—finally, good improvisation requires mastery. Every good musician practices and studies. No good improvisation will ever come from an unprepared heart and mind. In the case of a preacher the preparation may be a prayerful emptying of self before God or days of study and meditation. A master will be able to 'resolve the composition' by drawing on a well of notes, phrases, songs and performances. The preacher who is steeped in scripture, the good sermons of others and a keen understanding of contemporary culture will also be able to resolve the story even after a wild improvisation.

Multi-media preaching

In a multi-media age, do we need multi-media preaching? And if so, what form might this take? The increasing availability of video projectors and large flat screen displays give rise to many possibilities, with PowerPoint® and video offering two distinct sets of approaches.

PowerPoint

- *Bullet points*—The most obvious (and least helpful) way of using PowerPoint is to structure the sermon like a business presentation, complete with bullet points etc. Occasionally this might be appropriate but in general it should be avoided; a sermon is not a presentation.
- *Commentary on the Bible text*—by picking some key words and animating them it is possible to provide a commentary on the Bible text. This could be played at the same time as the preached sermon, offering another 'layer' of interpretation, sometimes amplifying and sometimes challenging the spoken word.
- *Audio-visual presentation*—PowerPoint is capable of having both audio and video files embedded. In theory you could put together a set of slides to music. In practice this doesn't work very well; you'd be better off using a crude video editor such as Windows Movie Maker (included with Windows 2000 and later).

Video

- *Use as a attention grabber*—take a video camera and get some *vox pops* on the topic of your sermon. If you're preaching on justice, say, go into the streets where you live and ask people a simple question such as, "What's the biggest injustice in the world at the moment?" Cut the answers together into a three or four minute film and you'll have the congregation grabbed.
- *Offer another perspective*—perhaps a music sequence can portray something which words alone cannot.
- *Use a commercial video*—is there a clip from a feature film or pop music video which could illustrate your sermon? Do you have a Church's Video Licence?
- *Use a Christian video*—there are a number of Christian videos which are very suitable for use in sermons. Aid agencies such as Tearfund and Christian Aid produce videos which can either be used intact or edited. There are also videos such as *40* which offer a new perspective on a familiar theme.
- *Let them preach it*—using the *vox pop* technique you could go to members of your community (both those who are and those who are not church members) and ask them, for instance, "What is the real meaning of Christmas?" Edit the result into a short sermon, arranging the answers so that they form some sort of progression.

There are lots of possibilities, limited only by your imagination.

Conclusion

Preaching today can be just as effective as it was in the age of reason. The key is to find ways to engage—both with the text and with your listeners. The key approaches seem to be based around story, testimony and performance. Experiment and find out what works best in different contexts.

Session Six Notes—Perspectives on Preaching

Sermon illustrations

There are lots of sermon illustration sites. Three of the better ones are:

http://www.sermonillustrations.com/ offers a very comprehensive range of illustrations, arranged under a large number of topic headings. The site is easy to use.

http://www.bible.org/illus.php?topic_id=961 also offers a good range of illustrations (many appear on all the different sites). Every book of the Bible is included in the topic index, with a number of illustrations tied to specific verses or passages.

http://www.ozsermonillustrations.com/searchbytopic.htm#W is an Australian site which focuses on illustrations with a contemporary resonance.

Preaching as experiential storytelling

The example of experiential storytelling given by Miller is of *The Jesus Journey*, a weekend-long event for teenagers, consisting of six 'journeys' (2003:134-148):

- *Journey 1*— the longest journey of the weekend, featuring lights, sound and narration. With poetry, music, sound and lighting effects, and dramatic narration the story of creation and fall is told from different perspectives. In the darkness that follows the fall, Jesus is introduced as the light of the world. At the end of the journey participants are encouraged to respond creatively.
- *Journey 2*—the only teaching of the weekend takes place here as a staff member portrays Jesus and recites the sermon on the mount. This is followed by group discussion.
- *Journey 3*—in small groups, people pick a parable and then acts it out for the others. Then everybody is struck with an incurable 'affliction' (a blindfold for blindness; ropes to incapacitate a limb, etc.). there is a rumour, however, that a man with a red cloth over his head can cure diseases. There is then a break during which people are free to act this out as they please. After a while some of them encounter 'Jesus' and ask for 'healing'.
- *Journey 4*—a re-enactment of the Last Supper.
- *Journey 5*—with narration and video, the events of the agony and crucifixion are recounted. There is a single candle on a red cloth. At the words, "it is finished", the room is plunged into darkness. There is then a time of response.
- *Journey 6*—on the last morning, the final journey enacts the resurrection. A single candle is lit; it rests on a white cloth. People are invited to light a candle from the 'Jesus candle' to join in the dance of faith.

For an article by Mark Miller, see:
http://www.youthspecialties.com/articles/topics/story/beyond_words.php From here you can find links to other articles on storytelling.

Preaching as Testimony

Anna Carter Florence (2007:146ff) has a number of exercises to help you live the text.

Preaching as performance

Augustine's *Christian Doctrine* can be found at
http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/jod/augustine/ddc.html

Preaching as Stand-up

An approach to stand-up comedy:

Gather material

First, examine yourself. Divide a sheet of paper into three columns. In the first, write down things that worry you. In the second, things that make you angry. In the third, things that frighten you. Make a list of all your negative personality traits. Self-effacing humour is always safe territory because if you laugh at yourself, others will feel comfortable laughing at you too. If you're ugly, talk about it! Think of yourself as a safe venue for mocking the ugly, since you're really just making fun of yourself.

Make a list of things that are unique about yourself, both inner and outer. Do you have freakishly large hands? An unusually high tolerance for alcohol? A phobia of eating in front of people? If so, talk about it. Keep a notebook with you always. Notice things which strike you and write them down immediately.

Put an act together

The stand-up comedy act consists of two main parts: the script and the persona. First, write some jokes and put them in a narrative sequence; then decide on the appropriate persona to adopt for your act.

A joke usually has a simple two-part structure. The first part sets up an expectation, the second confounds it: "(a) My wife just ran off with my best friend. (b) Boy, do I miss him." or "(a) I had a mud pack facial done, and for three days my face looked much better. (b) Then the mud fell off." Notice, too, than both of these jokes are in some sense told against the teller—I've lost my wife; I'm ugly. Although the basic structure is simple the accomplished performer will, like any good story teller, weave these basics into more complex narrative structures. Other common structures include:

- *Lists*—The magic number in comedy is three. The first two are alike, but the third is the opposite. ("Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some hire PR officers." -Daniel J. Boorstin)
- *Comparisons*—Pointing out vast differences. ("My girlfriend's idea of a romantic night is a candlelit dinner and a walk on the beach. Mine is a six-pack and a bag of crisps.")
- *Simile*—Describing something by likening it to something else. ("He looked like a squid in stretch pants." -Judy Tenuta)
- *Observations*—Pointing out how absurd everyday life is. ("You can't have everything. I mean, where would you put it?" -Steven Wright)
- *Mimicking*—Making fun of someone by acting like him/her. (Your interfering mom, your whiny significant other, your pesky parole officer . . . just make sure they're not in the audience that night.)

(From http://www.soyouwanna.com/site/syws/standup/standup3.html which has further advice.)

Good stand-up isn't just in the writing, it's also in the delivery. Each comic has his or her own style, often developed over a long period of trial and error in comedy clubs. For

instance, I once saw a lorry with the slogan "Eat Healthy British Chicken" emblazoned on its back. The thought came to me that if they were healthy chicken they'd still be alive and so not very good to eat. The question is, how would you write and deliver this mildly comic observation in such a way as to have the most impact.

Jester is a site which recommends jokes for you, based on your tastes: http://eigentaste.berkeley.edu/user/index.php

Simon Critchley, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Essex, investigates humour in this essay:
http://www.royalinstitutephilosophy.org/think/article.php?num=7

Preaching as Jazz

The quote from Cyrus Chestnut is cited in Jones 2004:35.

A streaming movie about Eugene Lowry and Jazz can be found at
http://www.lightworksdistribution.com/EpisodeDisplay/tabid/54/pid/20/Default.aspx#

You will need to register (it's free) to view the programme, one of a series about great preachers.

As an aside, a jazz setting of BCP was broadcast as the Sunday service on Radio 4 on 18th February 2007. The script and details of the music can be found at:
http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/programmes/sunday_worship/documents/20070218.shtml

Multi-media Preaching

40 can be bought from Proost (http://www.proost.co.uk/altworship.html) or from

Further reading

David Allis 2006, *The Problem With Preaching*—Allis argues that preaching is out of date, ineffective and unbiblical. See more, and some responses to his article on
http://www.the-next-wave-ezine.info/issue93/index.cfm?id=16&ref=ARTICLES%5FDOING%20CHURCH%5F253

Graham Johnston 2001, *Preaching to a Postmodern World*—after an examination of what postmodernity means, Johnston offers four 'rules for engagement': don't engage at the expense of the message; communication takes two—and time; risk involvement; address where you live. He continues with chapters on challenging listeners; obstacles to postmodern preaching; how to make inroads into contemporary culture; and some practices for engagement.

Roger Standing 2002, *Preaching for the Unchurched in an Entertainment Culture*—Roger Standing has experience of youth services with West Croydon Baptist Church. He looks at changes in communication style & the importance of narrative. The book gives results of a small experiment Standing conducted into different styles of preaching (topical and expository) and whether multimedia support is effective with young people. His findings were that younger people prefer topical sermons; that sermons which aid spiritual growth are appreciated most by people under 30; and multimedia sermons have no greater impact than voice-only. Standing's research also suggested that topical sermons stick in the memory better and that multimedia sermons are remembered longer than voice-only sermons.

Roger Standing 2004, *Finding the Plot*—explores narrative preaching in some detail, including a lengthy section on Lowry's work. The book contains a number of sample

narrative sermons and also contains insights from a number of interviews which Standing conducted with narrative preachers.

Jeremy Thomson 2003, *Preaching as Dialogue*—argues that preaching should be a collaborative activity and that its crystallisation into the sermon has robbed it of a dynamic interactive element which needs reviving today.

Session Seven—Worship on the Edge

It may seem strange to have a session on worship in this course. After all, isn't worship something that Christians do, and therefore inappropriate for our focus on the unchurched? But in practice there are two reasons why we need to focus on worship.

Firstly, unchurched people who come to faith do not just abandon their culture; so we need to find ways in which new Christians can approach God that are authentic to their own experience and world-view. Secondly, and more importantly, those working in the mission field in the West are finding that a lot of people become members of a worshipping community for some time before they are willing or able to make any commitment of faith.

In 1994 Grace Davy wrote a book on patterns of believing in Britain. She subtitled her book, *believing without belonging*, to represent the fact that many more people express belief in God than actually belong to any organised religious group. However, we are finding that increasingly, people take a journey which could be described as *belonging→believing→behaving*. First comes attendance at, and acceptance into, some form of gathered community which has worship at its heart (it might be a fresh expression of church, or a cell group, or an Alpha course). Next may come an awareness of God and an understanding of Jesus and the Spirit, leading to some profession of belief. Finally, often after some years, a growth in discipleship leads to behaving in a Christian manner. Given this, it is vital that we are able to provide culturally-consonant worship.

The changing form of worship

The Bible offers a picture of ever-emerging new forms of worship: Cain & Abel bringing their offerings to God; Noah's sacrifice; Abraham & Isaac; Jacob setting up the stone altar at Bethel; the Aaronic priesthood; the temple; the rise of synagogue worship during the exile; the early church's worship in homes; and so on. In each era and cultural context the faithful have sought to worship God in spirit and truth—in ways which are authentic and which enable us to put God at the centre.

This session is entitled *Worship on the Edge*, a term which is used as a convenient catch-all phrase to describe a number of contemporary approaches to worship which have one thing in common—they all try to respond to contemporary culture in ways which lead to a form of worship which allows people to offer proper honour and response to God while remaining authentically true to their own experience and condition.

Modern vs Postmodern Worship

Modern worship was, and is, authentic to its own cultural context. Martin Luther's dictum that, "the ear is the only organ for the Christian" is followed. Liturgy is seen as a linear succession of words and actions; even in the most 'catholic' worship, word tends to subdue image. Hierarchy is represented in the worship layouts, whether or not pews are present. Modernist worship is devised and performed by specialists and congregations can be seen as collections of individual passive consumers, whose role is to respond and not to initiate.

As we move from a modern to a postmodern culture these things will need to change. Worship on the edge tries to engage the whole person in ways which are culturally relevant and authentically Christian. Ideally, therefore worship on the edge has God and community as twin foci. The approaches and techniques should spring from a truly missional impulse: to worship in ways which enable people to honour God in a 'language' which is their own.

Postmodern worship seeks to move beyond the past but not to overthrow it—it both respects the heritage of the Christian past and is also keen to 're-mix' liturgical forms in new ways. It is also more participative than modern worship; sometimes radically more. Participation is not limited to the 'service' itself. In the alternative worship characteristic of the emerging church the whole community takes responsibility for creating and leading worship. The gifts of the group are the gifts that will be offered in worship. Other forms of 'worship on the edge' are not so radically committed as this but there is still an increasing tendency for groups of people, lay and ordained, to work together on creating and presenting services.

Scripture-based liturgy

In modern protestant worship the sermon is firmly ensconced as a core item in the service. In the liturgical churches it is seen as the climax of the service of the Word; in 'free' churches the word is even more central, betraying how firmly we are still embedded in a Reformation mindset. Scripture-based liturgies also place the Bible at the centre, but in a radically different way. Instead of a single voice proclaiming the scripture, the whole liturgy is designed to enable the congregation to experience scripture and to respond in worship to God. (Note the pattern of Isaiah 6: firstly the prophet *experiences* the glory of God, then he *responds* in confession and, after absolution and challenge, there is a commitment to *action*.)

The aim of a scripture-based liturgy is to match the liturgical structure to the narrative structure of the Bible text. So if a Bible passage has two people meeting, then interacting, then parting the corresponding liturgical structure could be greeting, teaching/prayer/sacrament, dismissal.

Some scripture-based liturgies have a sermon, some have a series of 'mini-talks' which act as commentary on the action, just as in a documentary film, and others have no preacher or narrator at all. For more information see Tarrant 2003 and the associated website. As an example, here is the outline of a service I devised and led at St Mary, Ealing in August 1997 (some years before I ever came across the term 'scripture-based liturgy').

- Opening hymn—"We are here to praise you."
- Service leader & bible readers process up
- Morecombe & Wise joke (Eric responding to Andre Previn: *I'm playing all the right notes, but not necessarily in the right order* to explain that although everything in the service came from the service book (ASB) it wasn't in the order they'd expect.)
- Responsive bible reading—John 4:4-42
    - Readers return to their seats
- Introduction by RS, setting the scene
    - Man comes to front and sits down
- Comment from RS (4-6)
    - Woman comes to front
- They enact the dialogue between Jesus & woman (*The Message*)
- Comment from RS: (vv 7-15)
- Prayers for living water led from congregation. (Band play *Let your living water* quietly underneath prayers):
    - Water for cleansing
    - Water for living
    - Water for healing

  - Water for cooling
  - Water for play
- Sing *O God my Creator, create in me that river of water that flows full and free*.
- The dialogue between Jesus and the woman then steps up a gear (15-26)
- Dialogue between Jesus & woman
- Man & Woman return to their seats
- Comment from RS
- Confession
- RS: She is not rejected
- Absolution (said together)
- Sing *River Wash Over Me*
- RS on true worship (19-24)
- Time of musical worship
- RS on Jesus as Messiah (25-26)
- She goes to village, "Come & see" (28-30)
- RS on mission
- Prayer for mission & other intercessions
- Lord's prayer
- RS: They believe for themselves (39-42)
- Creed
- Ending
- Sing "Shine Jesus, Shine"
- Dismissal

Note how much this still owes to modernist thinking: lots of 'input' from the front, not a lot of participation, and so on. Yet its impact was huge; people mentioned to me years afterwards. This is due, I think, to the fact that it used the structure of the Bible story to drive everything else.

Café Church

The term 'café church' is heard ever more commonly nowadays, though it is actually used in two separate but related senses. Firstly, there are those Christian communities who are experimenting with meeting in cafés or simply running cafés as an act of service and discipleship. The café forms a 'third place' (home is the 'first place', work is the 'second place') as described by sociologist Ray Oldenberg (see Frost 2006:56). A third place is somewhere people can meet and hang out. The bar in *Cheers* and 'Central Perk' in *Friends* are well-known examples. Starbucks spends a lot of time and money attempting to be a third place. In this kind of café church people can come and enjoy themselves and not necessarily realise that there is a Christian connection. But relationships get built, friendships form, and gradually there are opportunities for exploring faith (see page 41 above for an example of this kind of café church).

The second usage, which is the one relevant to this session, relates to a style of worship. In traditional church people sit in rows facing the focus of the liturgy—the altar or the preacher, depending on your tradition. They do not connect with one another except in awkward little rituals such as the peace. Fellowship happens before or after the service, not during it. Café church attempts to incorporate both 'horizontal' and 'vertical' elements by seating the congregation at small tables in an informal and relaxed atmosphere, serving coffee and tea before worship starts, and perhaps during it as well.

Café church often uses elements from alternative worship, making use of video, meditation, and symbols. It may also concentrate on simplicity, trying to do "church for people who don't do church." There are a few things to remember, such as the fact that there isn't really a 'front' if people are sitting around tables. Someone will always have their back to any given point in the room. Of course they can turn round but this isn't necessarily ideal.

So think carefully about service sheets and song books versus PowerPoint. Service sheets may clutter up the tables, video projection requires everyone to face the same way—although a few carefully-placed flat-screen monitors could offer the best solution.

If a sermon is to be preached it might be better if its delivered from the table where the preacher is sitting. Using a hand-held radio microphone and offering an 'open mike' time when anyone can contribute may well fit better with the café ethos. Put a time limit on contributions. There is always the possibility that non-Christians may say something you'd rather they didn't but this is a risk which has to be taken. Café-style offers the possibility of having a mix in the service of table-based prayer, discussion and well as worship which engages the whole room.

Xpressions Café

In the Chet valley benefice in South Norfolk, café church is taken a little further. Xpressions Café is in some senses a hybrid of the two types of café church mentioned above. It consists of three parts:

- Xpresso is a café, based downstairs in the church centre at Chedgrave, which is open from 09:30 to 12:00 on the first Sunday of every month. It offers free Fairtrade tea and coffee, fruit juices, and home-made cakes. Sunday papers are also on offer. People come and go as they please. Each table has a menu telling people what is going on and when in the other parts of Xpressions Café.
- Xpressions is based upstairs in the church centre. It offers family-based accessible worship with stories, prayer, craft, games and songs.
- Xplore is based in the medieval church, which is attached to the church centre. Xplore offers a range of approaches to worship, some quite traditional, others experimental.

Alternative worship

Alternative worship, sometimes known as alt.worship after the fashion of internet newsgroups usually traces its roots to the Nine O'Clock Service (NOS), which started at St Thomas, Crookes in Sheffield in the mid-eighties (Howard, 1996). Led by Chris Brain, a group of young people who were dissatisfied with existing forms of worship and familiar with rave culture started to create services which were multimedia, used contemporary music forms, and had a wide range of styles from loud rock to quiet contemplation.

Although the Sheffield experiment ended in 1995 in distress and controversy, many other alternative worship groups flourished. Most use video, rely heavily on ritual and symbolism, and adopt an experiential approach to liturgy. Worshippers are not seen as passive consumers of pre-packaged predictability but rather as co-creative participants in an ongoing drama.

Indeed, one characteristic of most alternative worship groups is that liturgy is collaboratively constructed. This is because liturgy is seen as an expression of community and of that community's response to the love of God. Typically, members will get together

to plan the next act of worship. The theme or topic will be decided or announced (there is no reason why alternative worship should not follow the lectionary). People will then volunteer to develop worship for that session, probably because the theme speaks to them (or the Spirit speaks to them through the theme). This collaborative aspect of worship is perhaps the most significant different between alternative worship and traditional worship.

Visions, an alternative worship group meeting attached to St Michael-le-Belfrey in York, write:

> *We are part of a movement rather loosely termed Alternative Worship, but the name doesn't really say enough—we mean that our response to the Divine Presence has to be born from our own experience together, as individuals and as a community, and not simply accepting whatever forms of worship are given to us.*
>
> *However, that is not to say we reject the past, rather that we see Christian traditions as a rich field of possible resource to draw on. But we also draw on contemporary culture in finding expression for our spirituality. The writer Len Sweet describes this sort of worship as being EPIC, and that certainly suits us:*

***E**xperiential*	*We aim to be a place where people can experience God rather than just talk about Him.*
***P**articipative*	*You're not an audience, you're part of the worship and always get a chance to interact if you wish.*
***I**mage Based*	*We use all available media (and lots of pictures) to enhance our worship.*
***C**onnected*	*We don't wish to bury our heads in the sand. We want to connect with each other, God, and the hurting people around us. To support each other in a world where we can all feel a bit isolated sometimes."*

Alternative worship often involves 'prayer stations'—discrete areas in the worship space where different activities can be carried out. This service, run by Grace at St Mary's Ealing gives an idea of how these prayer stations can be used. This particular service took place in the church hall, which joins onto the church (Grace often hold their services in the church building itself, as the photograph shows). In one room, tables had been set out, café style, and the service started here, with people relaxing and enjoying coffee etc. The following description comes from Kimball 2004:219 ff:

A service at *Grace*, which meets at St Mary's, Ealing

Opening

On arrival people are welcomed by team members and invited to wait in the café for the formal beginning of the service. When enough people are present, one of the team members welcomes them to Grace and gives a short introduction to the theme of the evening. Another member of the team then reads the story of the meeting on the Road to Emmaus, Luke 24:13-35.

The worshipers are then invited to visit the stations at their leisure, but not all at once so as to avoid overcrowding. They are told they will have an hour or so to go through the stations, which removes "deadline" pressures from those who wish to think and pray in the worship room or socialize in the cafe. The feel of the gathering is friendly and informal throughout, but more quiet and prayerful in the worship space. The team mixes with the rest of the worshippers at all times except when speaking or facilitating.

The stations

Each station has the relevant Bible verses as well as the other things described. Many stations have additional material not recorded in the order of service. Team members are responsible for their own stations and can elaborate or change as they wish within the theme. Much of the final form and content is as new to other members of the planning team as it is to regular participants. On this occasion the stations have a sequence as follows:

Station 1: The hiddenness of God [Luke 24: 13-16]

This station is about the "dark night of the soul," and how the experience of the absence of God can be legitimate and not the result of sin. There are "magic eye/stereogram" books conveying the idea that God may be present, but we do not see. There is also the story of the dwarves who cannot see Aslan's kingdom (from *The Last Battle* by C.S. Lewis).

Station 2: Downcast [Luke 24: 17-18]

This station contains the "bitter herbs" from the Passover meal. Worshipers are invited to taste these and read Psalm 22.

Station 3: Storytelling [Luke 24: 19-27] part 1

The disciples on the road to Emmaus were consoling one another by telling stories and remembering Christ. Worshipers are invited to write about a time in their life when they met with God, leaving their stories to be read by those who follow. The station consists of a polling booth fortuitously left in the church that week so people can write on their cards in the booth and pin them up on it.

Station 4: Storytelling [Luke 24: 19-27] part 2

About the power of hearing God's story, how this strengthens us in dark times. In a second polling booth is a CD player with headphones. The music is "Jesus' Blood Never Failed Me" by Gavin Bryars.

Station 5: Welcoming the stranger [Luke 24: 28-29]

Who is the stranger for you today? Have you ever encountered Christ in or through a stranger? The worshiper is invited to contemplate 10 photographs of different kinds of people.

Station 6: Breaking bread [Luke 24: 30-31]

A loaf of bread on a table, flanked by candles and an open art book showing Caravaggio's painting of the moment when Christ breaks the bread and is recognized by the two disciples. The picture is also projected on the wall behind the station. There is a meditation about recognizing Christ; there are many copies of this to take away. Worshipers break and eat pieces of the bread.

Station 7: Burning hearts and telling others [Luke 24: 32-35]

How are you going to tell others about Christ? How will you express your faith to others? There is a short piece of writing to think upon, and worshippers are invited to light candles and pray for others.

As well as following the "road," people sit or lie in the centre of the room to pray, write, or think. Others are still in the cafe or have returned there.

Labyrinth

The practice of moving from station to station in alternative worship has led to a revival and reconceptualisation of the medieval practice of walking a labyrinth as an act of devotion or pilgrimage. The labyrinth at Chartres cathedral is perhaps the most famous of these.

Unlike a maze, a labyrinth has only one pathway; there are no dead ends. In the Chartres-style labyrinth, shown in the photograph, the walker gets successively close to the middle and then moves right away from it until eventually ending up in the centre of the labyrinth.

Postmodern labyrinth typically consists of a pathway laid out through a space, in a church building or hall. Along the pathway are a number of stations which invite the pilgrim to participate in activities or reflections. These may be organised according to a an explicit theme, or bible reading, or may be implicit, perhaps following some liturgical sequence such as encounter, response, repentance, praise, intercession, mission.

Labyrinth is like a hybrid of alternative worship and the sort of processional liturgy familiar in 'stations of the cross'. The major difference is that labyrinth is not contextualised as corporate worship but is generally offered as an event open for one or more days. People come when they wish and participate as they wish.

Liquid Worship

Both labyrinth and the kind of alternative worship illustrated above have one thing in common with traditional worship: they follow a linear pattern. Liquid worship is nonlinear. The term seems to have been coined by Pete Ward (2002:96). In *Liquid Church* he draws attention to a couple of interesting aspects of traditional church worship.

Firstly, in the middle ages it was common for people to 'hear mass'. This was a multi-media spectacle, certainly as visual as verbal, with smells, elevation of the host, colourful vestments, bells, chants, and so on. Ward, citing Eamon Duffy, says that it was not uncommon for mass to be celebrated simultaneously at both main and side altars. The masses were timed so that the elevation could be witnessed several times by the congregation. Indeed, since this was before pews had been invented to keep people under control, they could wander from altar to altar as the spirit moved them.

A similar phenomenon can be observed in Orthodox churches today. In a church he visited on a small Greek island, people come and went as they pleased:

> *Inside the church a variety of activities was offered. Worshippers could kiss the sacred icon, light candles, eat the blessed bread that was available, fill small bottles with holy oil, and wander around the church—this offered the possibility of more icon kissing. The service was conducted while all this took place. As the singing and chanting continued the priest read petitions quietly in front of the altar. At one side of the church people were writing prayers on small pieces of paper, and these prayers eventually found their way to the priest….This was a corporate moment, but it was also decentred. The static and largely passive congregation that is characteristic of solid church seemed a million miles away.* ((Ward 2002:96)

In a service of liquid worship there will be a number of stations (or 'zones') and people can visit them in any order they choose. Some will go to one or two at the most, others will 'flit' from station to station. In liquid worship there is nothing to stop you visiting the same station two or three times.

After a liquid service I devised (it started linear, went liquid at the point of the sermon for about 25 minutes, then brought everyone back together for the ending), one man remarked how good it was to be able to choose how to learn and reflect rather than having to sit passively and follow someone else's thoughts. On the other hand, a woman at the same service complained that she missed having a 'proper' sermon. Perhaps I should have done a 'talk' in the vestry as one of the stations or videoed a brief homily and then looped it—that would have given even more choice.

It has been suggested that liquid worship can help bring about true all-age worship by offering zones which match the styles appropriate to different age groups within the congregation. It may also help to develop liturgical awareness in a congregation—because structure is imposed by others, worshippers rarely give it a thought. In liquid worship they have to make choices and therefore may come to a heightened understanding of the importance of structure in liturgy. Liquid worship can also offer people the chance to experience styles of worship which they have previously ignored or shunned, because they know that if it does not suit them they can easily leave one zone and go to another.

The example of Xpressions Café, given above, is another approach to liquid worship. In a sense, the whole thing is liquid: people come and go as they please and move from area to area as they choose. Liquid worship is not only for younger people. At the very first Xpressions Café one of the oldest members of the congregation was seen looking at the

menu and saying to her friend, "I'll tell you what, dear. We'll go to this session, then we'll come back and have another coffee, and then we'll go to that one."

An example of liquid worship

Lynn Fry, of East Harling, runs a monthly service using liquid worship at its heart. It also has café elements. In effect the café becomes one of the zones in the liquid worship. Here is a sample service sheet:

> *Welcome to Soul Cafe'!*
>
> *We're hoping that café-style church will help us bring people together while recognising that people learn in different ways and are looking for different things out of our gatherings. After our worship time with the music group, worship takes place at a series of zones around the church. You have to decide which zones you would most like to visit. You may decide to spend all your time in one place or try to visit several. Today our worship is based on Creation—thanksgiving for all God has done and saying sorry for the way we waste or spoil the things he has made.*
>
> - *Café— join us for tea and a drink.*
> - *Prayer zone in front of the altar—think of places around the world that have been spoilt or where people are suffering. Place a shell or a prayer on parts of the world that you would like to pray for.*
> - *Meditation zone—in St Anne's chapel. This is a place for silent prayer. Prayer ministers are available if you would like someone to pray with you.*
> - *Creative zone in the entrance. Think of a really beautiful place and paint or draw it! Also explore prayer painting. You don't have to be able to paint to do this!*
> - *Play zone by the font. Make a clay animal or plant. Read a story. Write or draw a prayer.*
> - *Talk zone in the Lady Chapel. Join in a discussion about our response to creation. How do we look after it? Does it matter if it's spoilt?*
>
> *We will gather together at 6:45 for a short act of worship.*

The service started at 6:00 pm and lasted about three-quarters of an hour. People were together at the beginning and the end, with the liquid part lasting about 30 minutes. Both children and adults were catered for. The service has proved to be very successful, especially with younger people.

The one serious complaint has been from those who feel that they are not getting enough 'teaching'. In a consultation with the leadership team at East Harling I firstly invited them to consider the role of teaching in their church life. Is the Sunday service the best time for it? At the time there were no midweek Bible study or cell groups in the life of the church; perhaps these might meet the expressed needs better. Secondly, why can't teaching or preaching be part of the worship? The preacher could be in a quiet area offering a talk or Bible study as one of the zones. Or a short talk could be pre-recorded or videoed and played on a loop in a suitable area. If noise insulation is an issue, headphones could be provided.

Conclusion

Worship on the edge never stays on the edge. What is 'cutting edge' today becomes mainstream tomorrow. The approaches outlined here are already on the way to becoming

mainstream. It may be a little while before the Liturgical Commission offer guidance for alternative or liquid worship but many quite traditional churches now use aspects of both.

Session Seven—Worship on the Edge

Scripture-based liturgy

Tarrant 2003, *Scripture-Based Liturgies*—Tarrant presents five sample services: Luke 24, an ecumenical Easter communion; John 6, a communion liturgy; Acts 8, service of the word with baptism; Philippians, an office; Hebrews, morning prayer. There are more scripture-based services at the Grove resource page (including a fuller version of the one I wrote in 1997):
http://www.grovebooks.co.uk/resources/worship/W175/W175-Resources6.html#C

Café church

George Lings has published two editions of *Encounters on the Edge* on Café Church (2007a, 2007b).

The Fresh Expressions website offers a brief introduction to café church and a couple of case studies of different approaches to café church:
http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/section.asp?id=190

A brief note on some of the practicalities of café church can be found on the alternative worship website:
http://www.alternativeworship.org/practice_cafechurch.html

Andrew Jones offers some interesting thoughts (his stuff is always worth reading):
http://tallskinnykiwi.typepad.com/tallskinnykiwi/2004/01/cafe_church.html

An example of a café-style harvest service which I did at Bacton in 2005 can be found here:
http://www.emerging-church.org/cafe_church_harvest.htm

For information about Xpressions Café, go to the Chet Valley Churches website at:
http://www.chetvalleychurches.org/xpressions_cafe1.htm

Alternative Worship

The quote from visions can be found at http://www.visions-york.org/visions.html

Baker & Gay 2003, *Alternative Worship*—as well as a brief but good introduction to the alt.worship scene this book contains a number of worship resources based around the church year. There is some excellent material and a CD-ROM is provided with words, images, movies and songs.

Buckingham Shum 1996, *Alternative Worship for the 40s-90s?*—Jackie and Simon Buckingham Shum describe the introduction to a parish church of 'alternative worship'. They write to encourage folk who want to be more creative in their worship, but whose churches have never seen anything more alternative than the ASB. http://seaspray.trinity-bris.ac.uk/~robertsp/altworship/altworship/simonbs1.html

Howard 1996, *The Rise and Fall of the Nine O'Clock Service.*

The *grace* website: http://www.freshworship.org/articles has a number of articles of interest. The one by Steve Collins on getting starting with alternative worship has some useful and practical suggestions.

Roberts, 1999, *Alternative Worship in the Church of England*—Roberts characterises alternative worship as having the following characteristics: multi-media environment

resulting from intense creativity; use of visuals; use of sound; collaborative leadership; breadth of liturgical resources. He traces the history of the movement from its roots in NOS and then considers the underlying philosophy, seeing the inevitable parallels with postmodernist approaches to text and the importance of shared interpretations of the Bible. He ends with a consideration of the role of alt.worship within the more formal and regulated structures of the C of E.

Labyrinth

Tarrant & Dakin 2004, *Labyrinths and Prayer Stations*—Tarrant & Dakin start by offering a few definitions and then move into a brief history of labyrinth and prayer journey, such stations of the cross, in Christian worship. The rest of their booklet is practical, offering ideas and encouragement for creativity. They end with some examples of labyrinths they have created. An excellent introduction to the topic.

Online labyrinth: http://www.yfc.co.uk/labyrinth/online.html#

Liquid Worship

Lomax & Moynagh 2004, *Liquid Worship*—After exploring a number of examples and options for liquid worship—whether for a small group or whole church; for a whole service or part of it—Lomax & Moynagh explore the rationale for this kind of approach. They claim that it can have a number of positive benefits including reducing self-indulgence, offering a chance to develop good liturgical principles; offering possibilities for all-age worship and recognising that the Spirit 'never leaves identical fingerprints'. They also argue that liquid worship encourages us to re-think our notions of community and can help us develop closer and more authentic communities. They end by suggesting some principles for getting started with liquid worship. There is more information at the Grove resource site: http://www.grovebooks.co.uk/resources/worship/W181-Resources.html

The work by Eamon Duffy cited by Pete Ward is *Duffy 1992*.

Further reading

Kimball 2004, *Emerging Worship*—looks at the emerging church worship scene in the US, with some references to the UK.

Leach 2005, *How to Use Symbol and Action in Worship*—Useful little book focusing on the use of the senses in modern worship. After offering a brief theological justification for multi-sensory worship, Leach looks at the environment for worship and then offers a number of practical suggestions for using symbols and actions in different parts of a service.

Pagitt 2003, *Reimagining Spiritual Formation*—inspiring account of the life of Solomon's Porch, a new church in Minneapolis. By telling stories of how the church tries to engage with people in new ways the pastor, Doug Pagitt, shows us how they approach spiritual formation through worship, hospitality, physicality, dialogue, hospitality, bible study, creativity and service.

Jonny Baker's blog: http://jonnybaker.blogs.com/ has lots of useful hints and provocative ideas. A must if you're interested in alt.worship.

Alternative worship: http://www.alternativeworship.org/

General information: http://www.emergingchurch.info/index.htm

Small fire is a site with lots of photos from different alternative worship events:

http://www.smallfire.org/index.html

Session Eight—Emerging Church

Post-Christendom

The world is changing. A key change for the church is what is sometimes referred to as the end of *Christendom*. It is no longer true to say that this country is a Christian country where everyone is, at least nominally, a Christian and where the church's duty is to pastor the flock—that is, everybody. Stuart Murray writes:

> *Total ignorance of church and Christianity may not yet be widespread, but it is becoming more common, especially in our inner cities. Over the coming decades, as the last generation who are familiar with the Christian story and for whom churches still have cultural significance dies, the change of epoch from Christendom to post-Christendom will be complete.* (Murray 2004:2)

Murray argues that the shift away from Christendom to Post-Christendom entails a number of other shifts:

- *From centre to margins*—in Christendom the Christian story and the churches were central, but in post-Christendom these are marginal.
- *From majority to minority*—in Christendom Christians comprised the (often overwhelming) majority, but in post-Christendom we are a minority.
- *From settlers to sojourners*—in Christendom Christians felt at home in a culture shaped by their story, but in post-Christendom we are aliens, exiles and pilgrims in a culture where we no longer feel at home.
- *From privilege to plurality*—in Christendom Christians enjoyed many privileges, but in post-Christendom we are one community among many in a plural society.
- *From control to witness*—in Christendom churches could exert control over society, but in post-Christendom we exert influence only.
- *From maintenance to mission*—in Christendom the emphasis was on maintaining a supposedly Christian status quo, but in post-Christendom it is on mission within a contested environment.
- *From institution to movement*—in Christendom churches operated mainly in institutional mode, but in post-Christendom we must again become a Christian movement. (2004:20)

Although it is relatively easy for Christians to acknowledge the death of Christendom it is much harder to accept just how radical a shift in our thinking, and practice is really demanded by its implications. The majority of church folk, including church leaders, still continue as if Christendom was still in its pomp.

In particular, the death of Christendom means that there are increasing numbers of people who have had no meaningful contact with church and who have no knowledge of even the basics of the Christian faith. If we are reach out to them there will need to be some fairly radical rethinking of what it means to be the church in the world.

Responses to the new situation

Tom Sine (2008) has identified four streams within the global church which are trying to engage in this radical rethinking. He labels these *emerging*, *missional*, *mosaic* and *monastic*.

The major emphasis in this session is the emerging stream and we will also take a brief look at the monastic stream. For completeness, brief descriptions of missional and mosaic follow:

Missional Church

The missional stream is best exemplified in this country by *Fresh Expressions*. It springs firstly from a renewed understanding of the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20; John 20:21; Acts 1:8). And, even more, it springs from an understanding of the missionary nature of God:

> *It is not the church that has a mission of salvation to fulfil in the world; it is the mission of the Son and the Spirit through the Father that includes the church. (*Moltmann 1977:64*)*

As Rowan Williams said,

> *I think the work that's being done through the Fresh Expressions initiative already, in just over a year, has been phenomenal. I think we've got a very gifted, a very committed team, we couldn't have done better. And everywhere we turn there is encouragement. It does seem that God is doing things already with the life of the Church in this country. And if it's true that mission, as it has been said, is finding out what God is doing and joining in, then we've certainly got a lot of joining in to do and that's wonderful.*

There is now a large literature on Fresh Expressions of Church, starting with the seminal *Mission-Shaped Church* report (Cray 2004).

Mosaic Church

The emerging church movement is predominantly white and middle class. Mosaic is a term coined by Tom Sine to cover a range of new churches where this is not true. He reports that there were at least twenty hip hop churches in the USA by 2008. There is also a growing number of churches in the States which deliberately set out to be multicultural, sometimes focused on mixed race people who do not feel comfortable in either black or white churches, sometimes deliberately setting out to celebrate the diversity of God's creation.

In the UK, the fastest rate of church growth is among Pentecostal Churches, whose congregations are largely drawn from African communities in London. Between 1998 and 2006 they started nearly 500 churches. For instance, The Redeemed Christian Church of God, a Nigerian-based group, is one of the fastest growing black churches with 210 'parishes' across London.

Emerging Church

Perhaps the most coherent practical response to changing Western culture is what is commonly known as the *emerging church*. The term appears to have first been used by Bruce Larson & Ralph Osborne in 1970. They saw a new kind of church emerging, a church in which 'and' is an important word. The emerging church is an umbrella term given to a range of new congregations which are trying to be church in a postmodern world. Emerging church is a movement rather than an organisation or denomination—indeed, many prefer to refer to it as a 'conversation' about ways of doing church in an unchurched world and there have been a number of writers and practitioners who have influenced its development.

Liquid Church

Pete Ward, in his thought-provoking *Liquid Church*, looks forward to the emergence of a new kind of church which is able to engage with the unchurched generations. He stresses that this does not yet exist but feels that something like it needs to come into being if the church is to survive in the new emerging culture of the West. One of the shifts which Ward foresees is a move from noun to verb, from state to process:

> *…I suggest that we need to shift from seeing church as a gathering of people meeting in one place at one time—that is, a congregation—to a notion of church as a series of relationships and communications.* (2002:2)

We should start thinking of church as an activity rather than a place or a fixed community. We make the same sort of distinction when we talk of being *in fellowship* or being *a fellowship*; the former is liquid, the latter is solid.

Solid church focuses on *attendance at services*—the more often you attend the more committed and faithful you are; *size*—the bigger the congregation, the more successful it is; *one size fits all*—solid church tends either to be stuck in middle-of-the-road position in terms of theology and worship (don't offend anybody!) or it is explicitly committed to one worship style or theological orientation; and *joining the club*—you are either 'in' or 'out'.

Liquid church, by contrast, is networked, dispersed, consumer-oriented and evanescent. Ward draws on J. D. G. Dunn's views on Paul's use of the phrase "in Christ" and its importance in creating the identity of the church:

> *The identity of the Christian assembly as a "body," however, is given not by geographical location or political allegiance but by their common allegiance to Christ (visibly expressed not least in baptism and the sacramental sharing in his body).*

Ward argues that anyone 'in Christ' is in the church, so that the church can effectively be thought of as a star network with Christ as the hub. He also sees support for his notions of liquidity in the notion of *perichoresis* (inter-penetration) used by the Cappadocian Fathers to describe the relationships between the members of the Trinity.

Ward claims that much of contemporary culture is a pursuit of purpose. Shopping, for example, is seen as searching for meaning rather than selfish materialism—and the church should accept the challenge implied by this. Liquid church moves from meeting need (the need for God, etc.) to satisfying desire—since consumerism is essentially about the desire for meaning and spirituality.

A New Kind of Christian

One of the most influential voices in the debate about new ways of being church is that of Brian McLaren who was nominated by *Time* magazine in 2005 as one of the 25 most influential evangelical leaders in the US. Each leader had a catch phrase to identify him (Jim Packer was "Theological Traffic Cop")—McLaren was billed as "Paradigm Shifter".

McLaren has written a number of books; perhaps the most significant have been the "New Kind of Christian" trilogy (2001, 2003 & 2005). Written as novels, they describe the journey of Dan, an American pastor, from his traditional evangelical roots to an understanding of postmodernism and the emerging church. McLaren's books are easy to read and quite seductive in their tone; they try hard to find a 'third way' between conservative and liberal positions and don't always succeed.

The immediate impact of McLaren's writings on the unchurched is doubtful. His major influence seems to be within the growing numbers of American evangelicals who are growing disillusioned with the right-wing doctrinaire versions of reformed theology and practice to be found in the States. It is these people who are being led to engage more directly with the unchurched and to start their own emerging congregations.

Alternative worship

Many emerging churches are associated with the alternative worship movement (see session seven), which itself traces its roots to the *Nine O'clock Service* at St Thomas in Crookes, Sheffield. It is probably true to say that the UK has taken the lead in this area though there are emerging churches in the US, Australia & New Zealand as well. Many of the emerging church leaders come from an evangelical background and some may still be happy with that label but all have gone far beyond the boundaries of traditional conservative evangelical orthodoxy and practice—while still considering themselves to be true to the foundations of their faith.

Peter Rollins (2006:5ff) suggests that emerging churches share a concern for the notion of journeying and becoming. He also argues that the emerging church is not just looking for a new way to present traditional beliefs in a contemporary context but it actually seeking to look again at the way we believe:

> *In short, this revolution is not one which merely adds or subtracts from the world of our understanding, but rather one which provides the necessary tools for us to be able to look at that world in a completely different manner: in a sense nothing changes and yet the shift is so radical that absolutely nothing will be left unchanged.* (2006:7)

Emerging Churches

The most important work on the emerging church so far is probably *Emerging Churches* by Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger who interviewed 50 emerging church leaders in the UK and US. They characterise emerging churches as "communities that practise the way of Jesus within postmodern cultures" (2006:44). They are clear about what they mean by modernity and postmodernity:

> *Modernity began with the creation of secular space in the fourteenth century. This sacred/secular split led to fragmentation in society simultaneously with the pursuit of control and order. Postmodernity marks the time when secular space was called into question concurrent with the pursuit of holism and the welcoming of pluralization in Western societies.* (2006:44)

According to Gibbs & Bolger there are nine 'practices' which characterise emerging churches. The three core practices are that they:

- Identify with the life of Jesus;
- Transform the secular realm;
- Live highly communal lives.

Because of these three, they also:

- Welcome the stranger;
- Serve with generosity;
- Participate as producers;

- Create as created beings;
- Lead as a body;
- Take part in spiritual activities.

Here there is only space to look at the three core practices and to indicate a little of their distinctiveness and implications.

1) Emerging churches identify with the life of Jesus

The emerging church has a distinctive focus on the life of Jesus, something perhaps more characteristic of Orthodox churches than Western churches, whether Catholic or Protestant. This leads to a number of emphases:

'Red-letter Christians'

Most emerging church leaders come out of an evangelical background and are used to the conservative evangelical emphasis on the Epistles and the Old Testament. Perhaps in reaction to this, they tend to focus on the Gospels and the work and teaching of Jesus. Some American emerging church members draw attention to themselves as "Red-letter Christians"; that is they focus on the words of Jesus (printed in red in some Bibles) as opposed to the black letter words of people like Paul. Although most would see this as a false dichotomy, it can serve as a useful corrective against an unhealthy ignoring of the gospel accounts of Jesus' life, teaching and ministry.

A focus on kingdom

Perhaps the key consequence of this focus on Jesus is a renewed emphasis on the kingdom of God. Following writers such as N. T. Wright (1992, 1996, 2007) and Dallas Willard (1998), the emerging church has adopted a theology of kingdom, sometimes opposing it to a theology of salvation (though the two are not mutually exclusive, of course). A phrase which is sometimes used to emphasise this is *Jesus did not come to take us to heaven, he came to bring heaven to us.* Brian McLaren's *The Secret Message of Jesus* is a recent (2006) exposition of this renewed interest in Jesus' teaching about the kingdom.

The focus is on exploring kingdom living here and now, rather than a future salvation in heaven. Dieter Zander is at Quest in Novato, California. He parodies the modern church in this way:

- *Give a little*
- *Do a little*
- *Pay membership dues*
- *Get a "going to heaven" ticket (through accepting the gospel).*

> *In this scenario the gospel is informing how we die. Instead, the gospel ought to be about how we live! A lot of church people don't know the relationship between the gospel of Jesus and how we are to live. They are threatened by re-evaluating that. Their belief is that they try to believe in Jesus so that when they die they get to heaven. Populating heaven is the main part of the gospel. Instead, the gospel is about being increasingly alive to God in the world. It is concerned with bringing heaven to earth.* (Gibbs & Bolger 2006:55)

Despite its name, the emerging church is wary of the term 'church'. Jesus didn't form churches, or call us to do so, they would argue. What he wanted was kingdom communities committed to work with God on the project of bringing the kingdom which is 'at hand' a

little closer. In this view, the Sermon on the Mount is not a set of impossible ideals pointing the way to a future perfect live in heaven but a practical manifesto which Jesus was deadly serious in laying before the world as the only way to live.

Doing evangelism

Many emerging church leaders are sceptical about much modern evangelism. They feel that it offers a 'sugar-coated' gospel of cheap grace to entice people in and only them confronts them with its costliness. This is seen as cynical and dishonest, and therefore dishonouring to Jesus. Instead many groups are up front about their commitment to justice and community action and their desire to live lives of forgiveness and servanthood which are transformed by their relationship with Jesus. Values are important and if honesty is one of your values you cannot hide even if it might be unattractive to potential converts.

The notion of *Missio Dei*, which could crudely be characterised by the phrase, "find out what God is doing and join Him", is important. Mission is God's work, not ours and the emerging church tries to discern the movement of the Spirit and to join in. Jesus implies as much when he said,

> *Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, unless it is something He sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, these things the Son also does in like manner.* (John 5:19)

Just as Jesus was incarnate in a specific culture and set of social circumstances, so each emerging community aims to exemplify incarnational engagement with the culture in which they find themselves.

2) Emerging churches seek to transform secular space

Because of this commitment to incarnational engagement, emerging churches either deny, or try to break down, what they see as an artificial split between secular and sacred. Many would agree with this quote from Madeleine L'Engle (2001):

> *There is nothing so secular that it cannot be sacred, and that is one of the deepest messages of the incarnation.*

In other words, they challenge the notion that there are some areas of life in which God has no part, agreeing with Psalm 24—"the earth is the Lord's and *everything* in it". To some extent this resonates with the holistic notions taken up so enthusiastically by many in the alternative spirituality movement.

Use of secular media

Emerging churches have no hesitation in using music, film or literature from popular culture in their worship; it is neither more nor less important than 'religious' art. Emerging worship is often playful, sometimes irreverent, and can be disturbingly nonlinear to those broad up on a diet of solidly predictable liturgy. But because this is often a faithful reflection of the fragmented nature of contemporary culture it is embraced as an authentic and incarnational spirituality. Scripture reading and study, preaching and proclamation are similarly transformed and the last four sessions of this course will explore aspects of these in greater detail.

Engaging all the senses

Martin Luther apparently once said that, "The ears are the only organ for the Christian." Unlike many in the church, emerging communities are not prepared to ignore today's

highly visual culture; instead they embrace it, determined to restate the truths of the gospel in ways which engage all the senses. It is for this reason that emerging worship contains smells, icons, and things to touch and taste as well as words and music.

Dissolving the transcendence/immanence distinction

Not only do the emerging churches reject the sacred/secular distinction, they also wish to embrace both transcendence and immanence. As Peter Rollins says,

> *What is beginning to arise…is the idea that God ought to be understood as radically transcendent, not because God is somehow distant and remote from us, but precisely because God is immanent. In the same way that the sun blinds the one who looks directly at its light, so God's incoming blinds our intellect. In this way the God who is testified to in the Judeo-Christian tradition saturates our understanding with a blinding presence.* (Rollins 2006:24)

This leads to a desire to celebrate both the mystical and the mundane aspects of life in all their fullness.

3) Emerging churches focus on living as community

The Nine O'clock Service (NOS) in Sheffield is often credited as the real start of the emerging church movement; at its heart was a Christian community. Influenced by David Watson, a young couple called Chris and Winnie Brain started the Nairn Street Community in Sheffield in the early 1980s. This involved about 30 people who lived in a number of houses in the city and who shared their incomes, read the Bible together, prayed and shared issues in the personal lives. (NOS started after a John Wimber visit to St Thomas in 1995 when Robert Warren, the vicar, asked Chris Brain and his band *Present Tense* to lead a service at Nine O'Clock on Sunday evening.)

This desire for community is characteristic of the emerging church. Church is seen as kingdom community because Christ's call to kingdom living means the dissolution of all pre-existing ties ("Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?", Mt 12:48; c.f. Mt 10:35). Church does not exist for itself but only as a (passing) expression of kingdom community here on earth. (The movement often known as the 'New Monasticism' takes this theme very seriously—see below.) Thus being church is all about learning to live as Jesus taught us.

The challenge is both to the selfish individualism of contemporary society and to the establishment church's focus on individual salvation and holiness. This is one reason why emerging churches often use dance music. The clubbing experience is often experienced in a corporate way which is very different from the experience of rock and pop music.

Because the focus is not on the church but on the kingdom, emerging churches rarely worry about numbers or other marks of 'success'. As Mark Scandrette of REIMAGINE! in San Francisco put it:

> *I am on a journey to find where heaven and earth come together in order to really experience the gospel. The goal of this is to see the gospel expressed, not necessarily in any terms of budget or number goals.* (Gibbs & Bolger 2006:94)

Relationships are often expressed in terms of family rather than institution. Andrew Jones of Boaz, a New Zealander who is currently starting a monastery in Orkney:

> *I believe the commitment is more relational than institutional. Emerging people commit to one another and to God, and that commitment is deep and lasting. We*

> *are stuck together as family, even if we don't like one another.* (Gibbs & Bolger 2006:97)

Relationship takes precedence over place. The gathering is no longer the most important aspect of church. Simon Hall of Revive in Leeds expresses this well:

> *We're moving towards membership of Revive having nothing to do with attending a particular meeting. Instead it's about being accountable (through a small group, prayer triplet, soul friend, spiritual director, etc.) to five basic values of discipleship. There is no law (you shall pray for this length of time, four times a day), but there is a sense of movement (this is my next step in following Jesus).* (Gibbs & Bolger 2006:105)

A local example

A local example is *Ambient Wonder*, an emerging church operating out of St Augustine's, Norwich. This is how they describe themselves:

> *As you'd expect ambient wonder is about relationships. with each other and with God. When we get together to do an event we have certain values. These include a commitment to using all of our senses, drawing on the creativity within all of us and an expectation that the event is about creating space to explore and experience rather than to prescribe and give answers. Our website will give you more information on what it looks and feels like to be at one of our gigs.*
>
> *These values are equally reflected in how we plan and organise. We look to involve as many people as possible, expect to learn from everybody and don't have a single "leader" of ambient wonder. We draw on a pool of people who've said they'll help put an event on. For an event one person will have the role of curator, a bit like in an art gallery, whose role will be to draw together the contributions of others and create the space for those who come to encounter God. (www.ambientwonder.org)*

Summary

The emerging church is an attempt to find ways of responding authentically to the call of Jesus in the 21st Century. It rejects some of what has been considered orthodox for the last few hundred years. It also affirms and transforms much which has been in the church since the very beginning.

The keywords of the emerging church include kingdom, authenticity, relevance, creativity and community. There is much that can be criticised but also much which offers a way forward for the church as a whole. The movement has already influenced the mainstream church more than most people recognise. It will continue to do so.

New Monasticism

The final stream picked out by Tom Sine is monasticism—often known as 'new monasticism', perhaps in response to Dietrich Bonhoeffer's comment in a letter to his brother:

> *The renewal of the church will come from a new type of monasticism which only has in common with the old an uncompromising allegiance to the Sermon on the Mount. It is high time men and women banded together to do this.*

The movement appears to have its roots in the late 70s and early 80s in both the UK and US but it was not until 2004 that a meeting of groups at St. Johns Baptist Church in Durham,

North Carolina formalised the overarching title 'new monasticism'. They came up with a set of twelve marks of the movement:

1) Relocation to the abandoned places of Empire.

2) Sharing economic resources with fellow community members and the needy among us.

3) Hospitality to the stranger.

4) Lament for racial divisions within the church and our communities combined with the active pursuit of a just reconciliation.

5) Humble submission to Christ's body, the church.

6) Intentional formation in the way of Christ and the rule of the community along the lines of the old novitiate.

7) Nurturing common life among members of intentional community.

8) Support for celibate singles alongside monogamous married couples and their children.

9) Geographical proximity to community members who share a common rule of life.

10) Care for the plot of God's earth given to us along with support of our local economies.

11) Peacemaking in the midst of violence and conflict resolution within communities along the lines of Matthew 18.

12) Commitment to a disciplined contemplative life.

At the heart of the new monasticism is a desire to live in kingdom communities of people who want to live a common life. But most new monastic communities do not share a common living space, though they are often situated in close geographically proximity.

Rule of life

Another characteristic of new monastic communities is that they, in common with traditional monasticism, submit to a rule of life. This is rarely the traditional 'three knot' rule of poverty, chastity and obedience. Instead each community adopts a rule which seems to be appropriate for their circumstances. For instance, 'smallboatbigsea' in Australia have what they call a Weekly Rhythm with the acronym BELLS:

- BLESSING: Who have you blessed this week through words or actions and what learning, encouragement or concerns were raised by it?
- EATING: With whom have you eaten this week and what learning, encouragement or concerns were raised by it?
- LISTENING: Have you heard or sensed any promptings from God this week?
- LEARNING: What passages of Scripture have encouraged you or what other resources have enriched your growth as a Christian this week?
- SENTNESS: In what ways have you sensed yourself carrying on the work of God in your daily life this week?

The Northumbria Community's rule is very simple: 'The Rule we embrace and keep will be that of AVAILABILITY and VULNERABILITY.' They go on to say:

> *As a geographically dispersed Community our Rule of life is deliberately flexible and adaptable, so that it does not prescribe uniformly, but provokes individually.*

It is descriptive rather than prescriptive in that it encourages seeking God for oneself, who we are, where we are, what we are, so as to be a sign of vulnerability, a sign of availability, wherever we are as a scattered Community.

Conclusion

In this session we have used Tom Sine's classification looked at some of the responses to the changing world in which the church finds itself. But the demarcations between them are not clear and there is much overlap. What we are seeing is a creative exploration of what it means to be church today. The journey will continue until the kingdom comes.

Session Eight Notes—Emerging Church

Post-Christendom

The first chapter of Murray 2004—*Post-Christendom* can be found online at http://www.opensourcetheology.net/node/361

The Rowan Willams quote comes from the transcripts of a radio interview on 8th December 2005. The full text can be found on the Fresh Expressions website or at http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/976

Liquid Church

The quote from Dunne is cited by Ward 2002:35 and comes from Dunne 1998:551.

For more on perichoresis, see Greenwood 1994:77 ff.

A New Kind of Christian

The full list of Time's 25 evangelical leaders was Howard & Roberta Ahmanson; David Barton; Doug Coe; Chuck Colson; Luis Cortès; James Dobson; Stuart Epperson; Michael Gerson; Billy & Franklin Graham; Ted Haggard; Bill Hybels; T.D. Jakes; Diane Knippers; Tim & Beverly LaHaye; Richard Land; Brian McLaren; Joyce Meyer; Richard John Neuhaus; Mark Noll; J.I. Packer; Rick Santorum; Jay Sekulow; Stephen Strang; Rick Warren and Ralph Winter.

Brian McLaren on *The Secret Message of Jesus:*

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5udKP9Q4_jw&mode=related&search= (6 mins)

Mosaic & Hip Hop Church

If you want to know more about hip hop church, a book worth reading (I haven't) may be Smith, Efrem & Jackson Phil *The Hip-Hop Church: Connecting with the Movement Shaping Our Culture* (Paperback).

Among hip hop churches, Crossover Church in Tampa, Florida ("Our Sole Purpose is to Give Your Soul Purpose") can be found at http://crossoverchurch.org/home.html#

For some images of mass at the Harlem Hip Hop Church, see http://pa.photoshelter.com/c/dbrabyn/gallery-show/G0000C888B5j6lgI/

In the UK the Black Majority Church Directory (http://www.bmcdirectory.co.uk/) gives details of hundreds of black majority churches. It estimates that there are more than 500,000 Black Christians in over 4,000 local congregations in the United Kingdom, the majority of whom are in England, and the majority of them in London.

The Emerging Church

For an account of the rise and fall of the Nine O'clock Service see Howard 1996. It is a secular journalistic account but seems reasonably fair and sympathetic.

Gibbs & Bolger (2006) do not include some churches which characterise themselves as emerging such as Mars Hill in Seattle (http://www.marshillchurch.org). This is because although Mars Hill is focused on reaching out to postmodern young people in a missional

way, its theology is firmly in the reformed conservative evangelical tradition. Mars Hill also embraces the mega-church perspective (it has about 4000 members), which is not typical of emerging churches. Mark Driscoll's approach to emerging church can be found here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RcbnGXSYxuI

"John Travis" (a pseudonym) developed a 'contextualisation spectrum' to describe different kinds of church in Muslim contexts. Greg Allison uses this spectrum to look at different kinds of church within contemporary Western Culture, suggesting that emerging churches occupy a number of different positions on the spectrum: http://www.theresurgence.com/gospel_culture_and_church_stuff/emergent

'Red Letter Christians'

The term 'Red Letter Christian' has been a adopted by a politico-religious grouping in the US. It includes people like Brian McLaren, Tony Campolo and Jim Wallis. For more information see *What's a 'Red-Letter Christian'?* by Tony Campolo at http://www.beliefnet.com/story/185/story_18562_1.html or *Red Letter Christians: Somehow, Jesus Has Survived Even the Church* by Jim Wallis at http://www.sojo.net/index.cfm?action=magazine.article&issue=soj0603&article=060351

Not everyone is happy with this alliance. For a critique see *'Red Letter' Liberal Christians: A New Front Group For Democrats* By Rev. Louis P. Sheldon, Chairman, The Traditional Values Coalition at http://www.traditionalvalues.org/modules.php?sid=2867

A focus on kingdom

It is hard to track down the origin of the "Jesus did not come…" phrase. It was used by Gordon Dalby in 2005 (http://www.abbafather.com/viewtext.cfm?pageID=DDBCF498-849B-4087-903B64CBAADB8718) but is probably older. Variants of it certainly are: Spurgeon apparently said that, "a little faith can bring us to heaven, but great faith can bring heaven to us."

A post on the Idealab blog in February 2007 offers one woman's experience of church and kingdom. It starts:

> *I went to church for about twenty years. At church they often would talk about how to be sure you're going to heaven. They wanted to make no-one was confused about this vitally important topic.*
>
> *They taught it's necessary to believe certain things and then pray a particular prayer. They said God will always answer the prayer if you mean it.*
>
> *Someone summarized what you need to believe and the prayer into four Spiritual Laws:*
>
> - *God loves you and offers a wonderful plan for your life.*
> - *Man is sinful and separated from God.*
> - *Jesus Christ is God's only provision for man's sin.*
> - *We must individually receive Jesus as Savior and Lord. (this is the prayer)*
>
> *These laws are all about me and fixing my problem. They remind me of commercials which assure me that my life will be so much better or easier if I buy what they are selling.*

> *Lots of people don't seem to know the Four Spiritual Laws. Or maybe they do and they just disagree with them. Most of them who believe in heaven seem to be hoping that if they are good people and are kind to others, that will get them there.*
>
> *I found places in the Bible where it seems like Jesus agrees with them. One time Jesus said people who did the following things would go to heaven:*
>
> - *Gave food to a hungry person*
> - *Gave drink to a thirsty person*
> - *Invited a stranger in*
> - *Gave clothes to someone who needed them*
> - *Looked after a sick person*
> - *Visited someone in prison*
>
> *Jesus didn't say anything about what they'd believed or whether they'd prayed any particular prayer...*

For the rest of the post go to http://conversationattheedge.com/2007/02/04/jesus-way-to-heaven/

Transforming secular space

The quote from Madeleine L'Engle is cited by Gibbs & Bolger 2006:65.

The quote from Luther is cited by Gibbs & Bolger 2006:70. However, they don't give a source for it and I haven't been able to track it down. Personal correspondence from Ryan Bolger (03-01-07) yielded the following:

> *I'm not sure on the exact source of Luther's quote—I've seen it referred to in many places. Margaret R. Miles refers to it in her book, "Image as Insight: Visual Understanding in Western Christianity and Secular Culture" (1985) on page 95. If you find her book, she might have the exact source.*

I haven't tracked it any further.

New Monasticism

Jason Byassee offers a good introduction in an article in *The Christian Century:* "The New Monastics: Alternative Christian Communities." It can be found at:
http://www.christiancentury.org/article.lasso?id=1399

smallboatbigsea's website is at http://www.smallboatbigsea.org/home/

The Northumbria Community's rule can be found at
http://www.northumbriacommunity.org/WhoWeAre/whoweareThe%20Rule.htm

mayBe is a group in Oxford trying to explore new monasticism. They offer some explanation of their way at
http://www.maybe.org.uk/cms/scripts/page.php?site_id=mb&item_id=monastic

Further reading

Brewin, Kester 2004, *The Complex Christ*—Brewin was one of the founders of Vaux, an emerging church in London with a strong focus on the arts ("we had a logo before we had a venue"). He offers an insider's view of the current state of the emerging church and what it might become if it continues to emerge.

Frost & Hirsch 2003, *The Shaping of Things to Come*—stimulating and provocative book which urges a change from Christendom mode to missional mode. This involves moving from being attractional, dualistic and hierarchical to incarnational, messianic and apostolic. Although a little heavy at times the book is full of ideas and provocative propositions. For instance, a missional church needs APEPT (apostolic, prophetic, evangelical, pastoral and teaching) leadership as per Ephesians 4, rather than just a pastoral and teaching leadership which serves to (try to) maintain the status quo of the Christendom church.

Frost 2006, *Exiles*—Michael Frost's reflections on living as a Christian in a post-Christian world. Michael is part of smallboatbigsea in Australia.

Hinton & Price 2003, *Changing Communities*—not emerging church as such, the organisation *New Way of Being Church* encourages experiments in community living and community action inspired by the base ecclesial model developed in South America. This book offers a series of accounts of different approaches to living the gospel.

Moynagh, Michael 2004, *emergingchuch.intro*—Despite the title this book is not specifically about the emerging church movement. It is actually a very good introduction to the whole area of Fresh Expressions and Mission Shaped Church.

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